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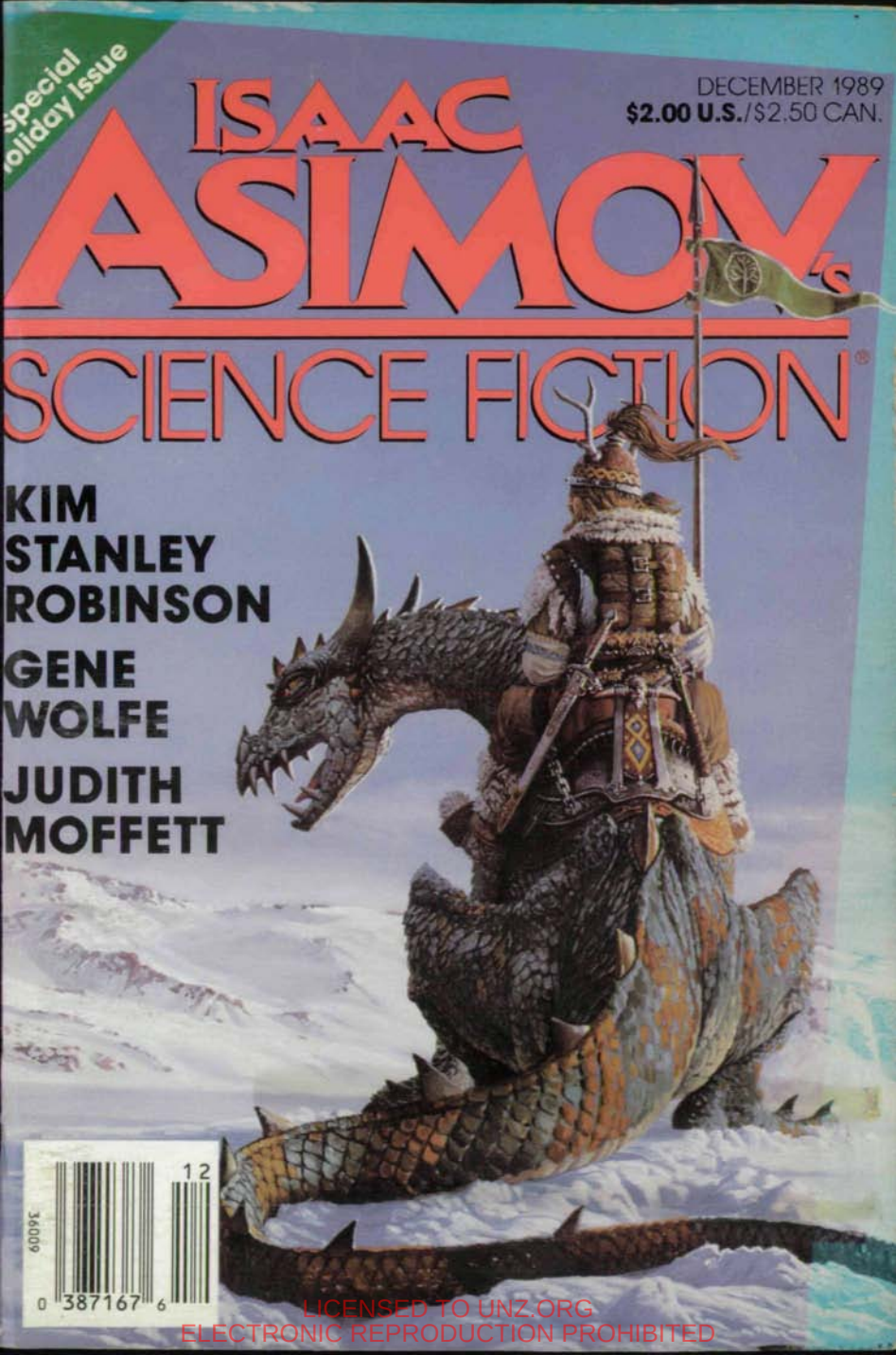

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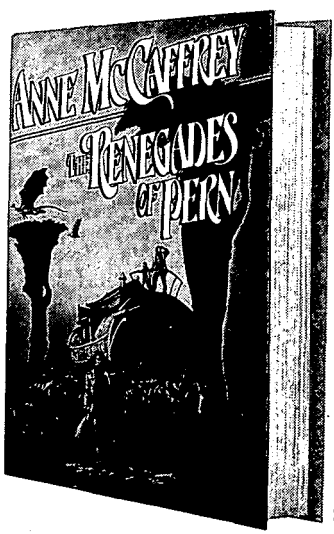

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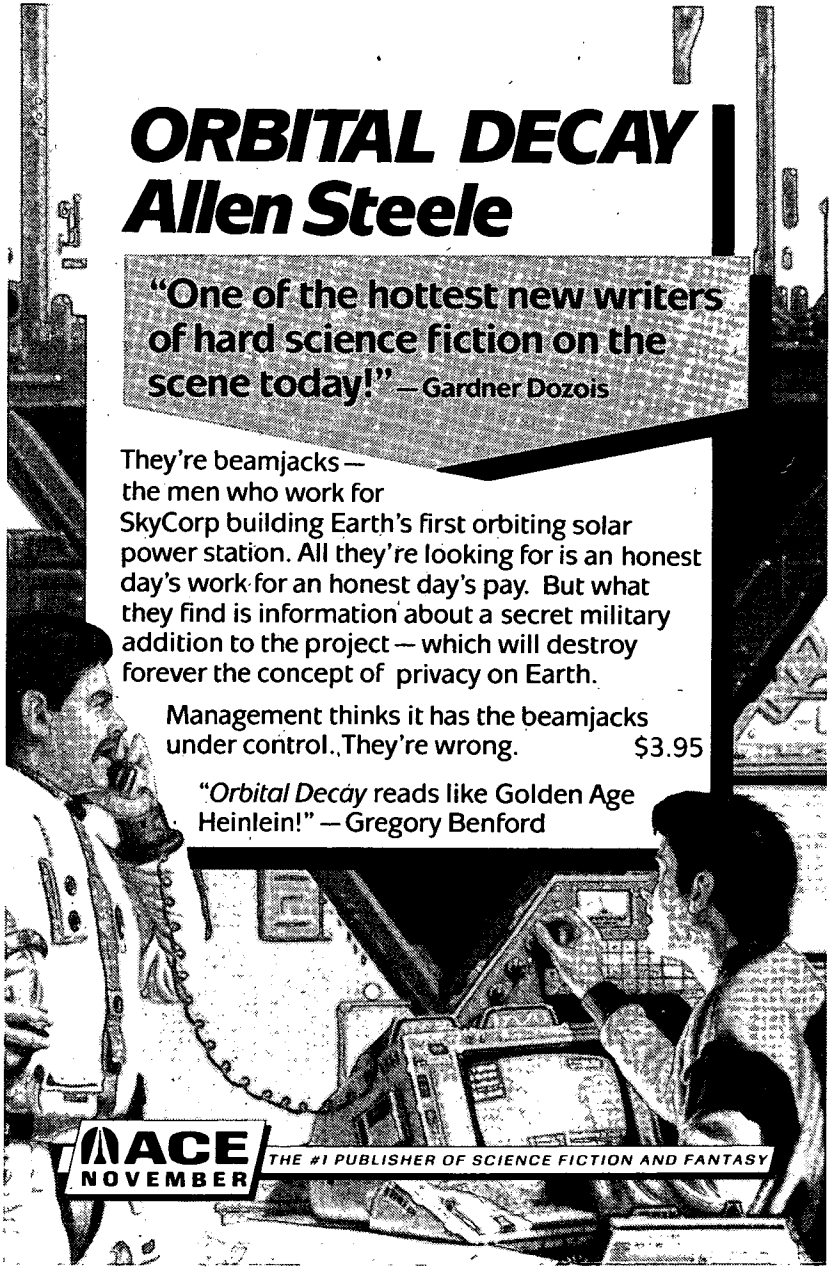

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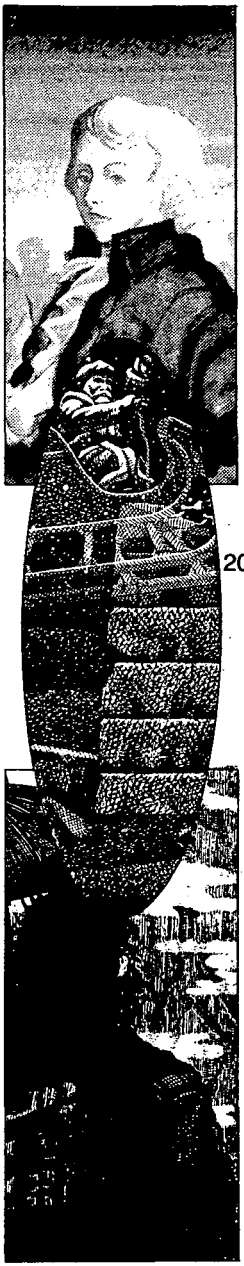

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Vol. 13 No. 12 (Whole number 150)
December 1989
Next issue on sale
November 14, 1989

Novella

108 The True Nature of Shangri-La — Kim Stanley Robinson

Novelettes

36 Remembrance of Things Future — Judith Moffett
76 The Wagon God's Wife — R. Garcia y Robertson

Short Stories

20 Tracks — Jack McDevitt
34 Small — Aaron Schutz
60 Divertimento — Gregory Frost
69 How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen — Gene Wolfe
96 Duplicity — Karen Joy Fowler

Departments

4 Editorial: Distraction — Isaac Asimov
9 Letters
17 Neat Stuff — Matthew J. Costello
174 On Books: Far, Far Out — Norman Spinrad
191 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Jack Daw and Jack C. Haldeman, II
Cover by Keith Parkinson

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EDITORIAL

DISTRACTION

by Isaac Asimov

One of the chief enemies of the serious writer is distraction. Writing is hard work, not in the caloric sense, of course—it's not like chopping wood, or digging ditches—but it places a strain on the mind that can be almost unbearable. You can't think of the right way of saying something—or you do think of a way, but after it's down on paper it suddenly seems ridiculous.

Under such circumstances, the writer will seize on any excuse to stop writing, or not to start. ("Maybe I'd better knock off and do my mail. The postman will be here in less than two hours.")

In fact, a friend of mine who is an excellent writer once said that one shouldn't write unless one had a bloc of time at least four hours long that would be utterly free of interruption, since it took a long time to get started and, once started, if interrupted in the slightest, it would take an equally long time to get re-started.

Then one time I was asked by an interviewer what ritual I used to get started writing.

"Ritual?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes, do you first sharpen your pencils, or do setting up exercises, or call a friend—"

"Aha, you mean what do I do to get myself into the mood of writing? —Well, what I invariably do is to start by getting close enough to the typewriter to reach the keys."

In short, I am always in the mood to write, and I am undistractable. That is, if I am interrupted, whether for a short or long period of time, I can always return to my writing and start at once at the point where I left off (even in the middle of a sentence) as though I had not been interrupted at all.

This is a valuable ability for any writer to have and I would like to explain how I think such a faculty can be developed.

First, it can best be developed if you're young and your way of life has not yet become fixed into a mold that can't be cracked without serious internal injuries. Second, it can best be developed if you're not the kind of literary artist who broods over a sentence for two hours, polishing and re-polishing it to a supernal gloss.

Well, then, if you're a young man or young woman who is anxious to write for a living, I would suggest

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that you not only learn your grammar and spelling, that you not only read good writers to get an idea of how one handles the English language, but, in addition—that you learn to deal with distraction. Without the ability to overcome distraction, everything else may turn out to be useless to you, at least as far as writing for a living is concerned.

To deal with distraction, you might try the Demosthenes method.

Demosthenes was a young Greek of the fourth century B.C. who intended to become a great orator. (It was important to be one because the ancient Athenians, like modern Americans, were an extremely litigious bunch, and a great orator could sway the jury and win cases regardless of the merits of the case.)

Unfortunately, Demosthenes was shy and had trouble speaking. He therefore went down to the seashore, and placed pebbles in his mouth. He tried to make himself speak clearly through the pebbles until he had perfected his enunciation. He also shouted his speeches against the roar of the waves to teach himself to project powerfully. In the end, when he removed the pebbles and spoke only to human beings, he found that he had become a powerful and clear speaker. In short, he deliberately piled disadvantage on himself and learned to deal with it. The disadvantages he learned to overcome were much greater than those he was likely to meet in real life, and so ordinary

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vicissitudes became a piece of cake to him.

Unlike Demosthenes, I wasn't bright enough to do this deliberately, but it was done for me, by the force of circumstances. When I began to write in my teenage years, my family had a candy store and I had to do my share of the work. Nor would I be relieved on the plea that I was in the middle of a story. I was yanked right out from behind my typewriter.

Then, too, we lived in a railroad apartment, which meant there was a long straight line of rooms, with every individual room being a passageway to another room. Consequently, one or another member of the family was forever walking through my room—clump, clump—with no effort at being quiet because the master-writer was engaged in shaping a sentence. What's more, if my sister wanted to play her record-player in the next room, she played it. A plea for quiet would have been very counterproductive. And my mother, who worked hard enough for three mothers, relieved her feelings by never speaking in a voice lower than a scream. And through the imperfectly-fitted window of my second-floor room (which had to be open for ventilation—for whoever heard of air-conditioning in those years) came the constant roar of city traffic, and the shrieking of children at play.

In short, my apprenticeship as a writer took place in a boiler-factory under conditions of constant enforced interruption. I doubt if I ever had fifteen straight minutes of peace. Naturally, the fact that I continued to write meant that I had learned to withstand incredible noise and interruption.

Once I achieved sufficient success to force some measure of elementary consideration on my rather awed family, I found I didn't really need to. I was undistractable.

Therefore, if you are young and want to develop into a writer, *don't* seek out peace and quiet for your experimentation. You will be ruining yourself if you do, for you will then never find it sufficiently peaceful and quiet in ordinary life. Write in the very hurly-burly of affairs; seek out discomforts and outrage which will interfere with you. Pack those pebbles in your mouth and shout against the waves. —And then, once you've learned to do that, you will be immune to the ordinary annoyances of the world and distraction will hold no terrors for you.

This is not to say that once you've learned to deal with life's horrors an occasional day of peace may not be a blessing. Let me tell you a happy memory of my own.

In the course of my first marriage, my wife and children quickly learned that I didn't mind being interrupted, and they proceeded to interrupt me freely. I never objected.

However, my family broke up in 1970, and I came to New York, rather miserable and lonely, and began to associate with Janet Jepp-

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son. It didn't take me long to decide that I wanted to make her my beloved wife, Janet.

Came Christmas of 1970 and Janet invited me to her mother's home in order to engage in the Christmas festivities. I never celebrate Christmas myself, or any holidays at all, for that matter, but I naturally wanted to please Janet and to meet her family. I agreed to come at once, therefore, but Janet noted me looking regretfully at a thick set of galleys I was using for the purpose of preparing an index. (I *love* to do indices.)

She was as anxious to please me as I was to please her, so she said, "Bring the galleys along. There will probably be some time for you to do a little work on it."

So I did. We went to her mother's very pleasant house in New Rochelle, and they made me comfortable in what had once been her father's den. It was just right. A comfortable chair, a nice desk, room to spread out my galleys and my index cards. —And then a miracle happened.

Janet's family, not knowing me, assumed that, like all writers, I was not to be disturbed on pain of death. They therefore tip-toed about the house, conversed in whispers and never came near the den. I was not asked to help out with the preparations. I was not expected to make small talk. And it was all on a quiet suburban street where life was lived out in a hush of peace.

I had at least five hours of absolute heavenly quiet before I was called in to partake of the Christmas feast.

It never happened again, of course, because Janet's family and my dear wife, Janet, herself, quickly discovered that interruption and distraction were not viewed by me as fatal diseases, and then of course they all interrupted me freely.

But on that one occasion, when I was with a considerate family that didn't know me very well, I fulfilled, for the one and only time in my life, my writer-friend's dictum that one should not work without a sizable stretch of absolute peace stretching before you.

I often look back on that unusual time with a sigh but I am very thankful it happened only that once, and thirty years after I had established myself as a writer.

Heaven is great, but a writer who counts upon Heaven as a matter of course is never going to write. Remember that. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I must write and commend you for finding and using the talent of a very, very good artist, in my opinion.

She has a technique with punch, though it is simple, and immediately sparks my interest in the stories she illustrates because of her subtle clues. Her illustrations of a few of your longer serial stories, where you used her work exclusively, superbly caught the essence of the author's ideas.

Thank you for letting me see her work. I wish Janet Aulisio much success in her career. My love affair with *IAsfm* and with your sister magazine, *Analog*, will continue unabated for many, many years.

Yours,

Caroline Lc Goldsmith
Hicksville, NY

Very good. My dear wife, Janet, doesn't in the least mind love affairs with the magazines. (She's not the same Janet as the artist you praise, of course.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Mr. Spinrad wonders about the reaction of a reader coming cold to *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. I did just that. I did not throw it across the room; I even finished it. I retained to the last my impression from the first: What a gallery of losers. Perhaps a rereading would reveal Gibson's craft virtues, but none of them are worth revisiting.

As to Gibson's "formal strategy," it is far from rare. No argument that Cordwainer Smith did it best, but several writers have made secondary universes with more than one story in them.

Perhaps the others lie too much within Old Wave literary limits for Mr. Spinrad's taste: Niven's "Known Space," Heinlein's "Future History," Piper's "Future History" and his "Paratime," the Good Doctor's robots—not "Foundation," that's linear. White's "Sector General" is borderline. Spinrad is a pompous ass. Again.

Sincerely,

Lee Burwasser
Landover, MD

Oh, well, Norman makes you think and keeps the juices flowing. I try to do that in my editorials also and every once in a while they educe indignant letters. One writer produced a diatribe against me you wouldn't believe but sweet Sheila wouldn't let me put it into the letter column. (She's fond of me for some reason.)

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Isaac Asimov & Mr. Gardner Dozois,

In January it was Gregory Benford's "All The Beer On Mars." "Free Beer And The William Casey Society," was served to us by Allen M. Steele, in the February issue. Now I must wait seven days until February 7 for the March issue, to see *if* and *what* the next beer oriented story will be.

Here's looking at you,

Sincerely,

Matthias J. Barrett
8116 Bullneck Road
Dundalk, Maryland 21222

I can't understand it. I've never tasted beer in my life. But then, I'm a teetotaler.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Whoever Bought "Tiny Tango":

Good job, everyone. Took guts. Tore me up. Kudos and Hugos to Ms. Moffett. I agree with everybody else—you got a damn fine magazine there. Almost wrote you, oh, a jillion times at least to say so, like practically every time Moffett, Willis, Kress, Shepard, Silverberg, Lee, Pohl, Williams, Cadigan, etc., etc. (yes *of course* including the venerable Doctor) sold you work, especially when illustrated by Aulisio, Walters, Potter, etc., etc. Can't think why I didn't . . . but glad I have now—Ms. Moffett's writing, Ms. Aulisio's title page artwork, and your decision to publish all deserve praise. (A sour note to the art director: I don't know whose idea it was to paste up the "word of warning" so it appeared to come out of the Reaper's head, but in my opinion the result was thematically gratuitous [not to say tacky], visually off balance, and aesthetically far below your usual sensitive standards. You use fine art that never fails to do your fiction justice; please let it speak for itself as well.)

Thanks for the soul food; please send more.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Marcum
Columbus, OH

We like to think that Asimov's *is at the cutting edge of science fiction, and if it is, that takes guts all the way.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been and still am an avid fan of yours. I started reading in the 1960s; I started with the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.* As I broadened the scope of my reading, I joined the Science Fiction Book Club; naturally "The Foundation Trilogy" and "I, Robot" were among the first books that I ordered. As my collection grew my wife, an enthusiastic reader, soon started to read SF instead of her normal fare, mystery novels.

Many pioneers of the genre have either quit writing or passed away since I began my affair with SF, and I truly miss them. A new generation appeared, and I'm not certain if any shall become one of the great writers of this genre. Today fantasy appears to be the norm; what has happened to fiction which is based on scientific facts?

Ah, the reason for my letter is to ask a favor from you. Some of the early stories I read and enjoyed

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were about the Chameleon Corp., but for the life of me, I cannot remember the name of the author. We currently have over five hundred books in our library, and not one of them has any Chameleon Corp. stories. I looked through many anthologies and several of my yearly books, but I failed to find any reference to refresh my memory.

Please Dr. Asimov could you tell me the name of the author, and also if any book is published listing all of the authors of Science Fiction, their titles, publication dates, publishing company, and a synopsis of the story. Any help would be appreciated and I wish you the best on any of your future endeavors.
Sincerely,

Mike Putek
Ft. Walton Beach, FL

You know, Robert Frost used to say that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. I can't help but think, sometimes (a purely personal opinion), that writing fantasy is like writing science fiction without a net, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry but the Chameleon Corps doesn't strike a chord with either me or Gardner.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors:

Norman Spinrad failed to point out that the reason everyone is defecting from Cyberpunk might be that it, as opposed to the New Wave, was always a more strictured sub-genre. Formal restraints were largely ignored by New Wave practitioners; therefore the movement ably supported writers as diverse as Leiber, Sallis, Saxon, Moorcock, and Disch.

Not only did Cyberpunk become entrenched in a narrow set of conceptual, stylistic, and sensory considerations, it also negatively connoted the punk lifestyle —characterizing it by overly aggressive behavior, licentiousness, propensity for violence, anomie, and political extremism. Moreover, the very term Cyberpunk sounds juvenile, like the concoction of a comic book editor. No wonder writers have fled this fledgling movement, perhaps knowing that adventitious media attention can hardly balm reputations.

In 1979, I published "Punk Zone" in an old *Heavy Metal* ripoff comic book. This story featured "plugged-in" vicious street punks in a different solar system's urbanized, polluted world. Although quaintly illustrated, the storyline conveyed a solidly realistic "punk" sensibility, with aesthetic derivations traced to the novels of Willard Motley, Harlan Ellison, and Richard Price, and to music of late seventies punk/wavo style. Despite its numerous faults, this story concentrated on human behavior, even using existentialist mainstream devices, with a focus on individual despair.

Ignored were motifs of multinational collusion and information simony. Perhaps Cyberpunk would still be a vital, expanding movement if its major practitioners had melded some "humanism" or "free-form" into their dialectic, and had avoided technological obscurantism. By extinguishing itself so early, the movement proved more faddish than anyone could have

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thought, and quickly became a taxonomic footnote.
Cordially,

Tony Daley
Chicago, IL

Well, that does it for me. I'm not going to write any cyberpunk stories.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

The letter from Theodore Reed (*IAsfm,* March 1989) which criticized J.G. Ballard (and Norman Spinrad too, I suppose) amused me a great deal. To my mind, Ballard's idea of being outrageous is a lot like that of Rusty Warren, the old "ha-ha, you know what *that* means" comedienne. (Remember her?) As for artistic merit, I have always had a good deal of contempt for the deliberately obscure "artist." Hey, if you have something to communicate, then communicate it; don't just mumble something under your breath and whine about being ignored!

Sorry! I didn't write with the idea of picking on Ballard. What I wanted to say was that it is your writing, Dr. Asimov, that I consider to be the antithesis of Ballard and his ilk. Your writing is always clear; easy to understand no matter that the subject itself be quite complex.

I suppose that supporters of "artsy" writing would say that "Asimov can't be too smart! We can understand what he's saying!" That would seem to be the logical consequence of believing that everyone would love J.G. Ballard if they

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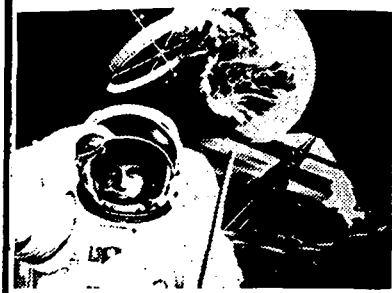

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could only understand what the heck he was talking about!

Oh, well. Just count me in as one person who isn't afraid to say that he doesn't get it.

Thanks,

Gary Fletcher
Port Coquitlam, BC
Canada

Well, thank you. I do try to write clearly. I do not *think this will make people think I'm unsmart. After all, think about it. Writing clearly must be very difficult or more people would do it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Mr. Silverberg mentions *lese-majeste* in his introduction to his tale, "In Another Country" in the March issue, wondering if he is not being presumptuous in trying to write a mirror story to "Vintage Season." He was, but inadvertently, it seems to me. As he may or may not know, "Vintage Season" is a collaboration of C. L. Moore *and* Henry Kuttner. He only mentions Ms. Moore in his preface, so some may think she wrote it on her own. This is not so. When originally published, in *Astounding Science Fiction* September 1946, it was bylined, "Laurence O'Donnell," a pseudonym that was generally, though not always, used for collaborative work. When first collected in *No Boundaries* in 1955, it appeared as by Kuttner and Moore. Finally George O. Smith, in his autobiographical story collection, *Worlds of George O.* (p. 30-31), describes how Kuttner and Moore wrote the story (and how he, Smith, contributed the last line).

I mention this *not* as denigration of C. L. Moore. But Henry Kuttner had the misjudgment to die twenty-five years too soon (in 1958 at age forty-four), and is constantly in danger of being forgotten. It is no denigration of Moore to say that Kuttner deserves some credit, too, particularly since his work is woefully undercollected (there's something for Mr. Greenberg to do. Instead of trying to have writers imitate classic works, why not get the forgotten works back in print?). To give an analogy, what would Robert Heinlein's reputation be if he had died about 1961? Or Frederik Pohl in 1964? Might have beens are always tricky, but it is surely safe to say that, had he lived, Henry Kuttner would have been a Grand Master. I think Mr. Silverberg could have explained this a little better.

I liked the Ellison story very much, but why was it listed as a novelette when it was shorter than two of the short stories in the issue? I suppose a cynic would say that Mr. Ellison, The Guy With Lord Knows How Many Hugo And Nebula Awards (But Always Ready For MORE MORE MORE!!!) is trying to put a fast one over on Duh Hicks from Duh West by calling a short story a novelette. Since there are always fewer novelettes published in a year than there are short stories (in 1988, *Asimov's* published thirty novelettes versus fifty-three short stories), this stratagem gives "The Few, the Proud" a decided edge. As I said, this is the response of a cynic, and I've given up cynicism for Lent. But by the

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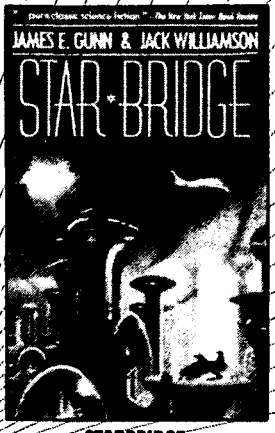

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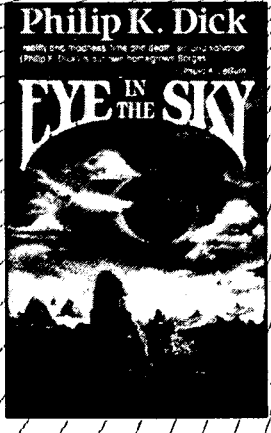

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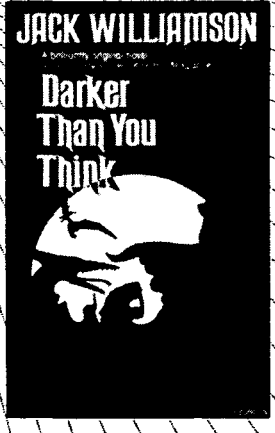

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time the annual index rolls around (and with it, the Readers Award poll—another chance for MORE MORE MORE!!! awards) Lent will be over. I'm looking forward to it.

Paul Osborn
Bremerton, WA

I have always been told that Kuttner and Moore wrote together so intimately that they themselves didn't know which of them did what. And as for the confusion between novelettes and short stories, sweet Sheila is doing her best to untangle the mess and see that everyone is treated fairly.

—Isaac Asimov

When the Fourth Annual Readers' Award poll does appear, readers will be asked to look at the stories carefully and to only *rank them in the category under which they are listed in the Index.*

—Sheila Williams

Dear Mr. IA of *IAsfm*:

I have been a fan of yours for a long time, so when the opportunity arose, I bought a subscription to your magazine. So far I have received only two issues, but already I'm hooked! I especially enjoyed Sheffield's "Destroyer of Worlds" and Janet Kagan's "The Loch Moose Monster."

In fact, I was so inspired by these excellent selections that I decided I would like to give this a try myself. Please send a copy of your manuscript guidelines, so that I, the second-worst science fiction writer unlynched (there was some guy who said he already had first place—Amazon, I think his name was), can send back stories that will hopefully be up to par. Still, better a rejection slip from the good doctor than . . . Hmm. I'll have to think about that one.

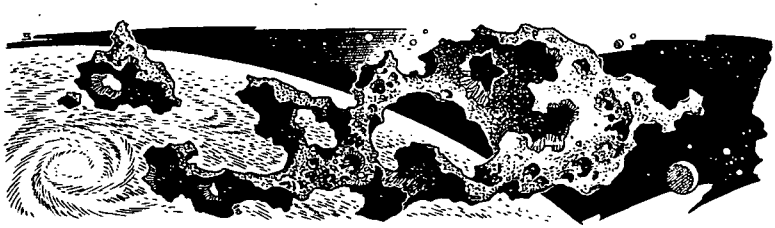
Anyway, much as I love your magazine, I do have one complaint: The picture on your editorials, the only likeness of you throughout the publication, only shows the left half of your face. Whereas we know there is nothing wrong with your right brain, this photo leaves too much to speculation. If you can fix that, I'll be forever a reader (although I probably would be anyway).

Speculatively,

Jeremy Edwards
Dallas, TX

Actually, sweet Sheila doesn't want to put the right side of my face in the photo. She says that there is an unearthly beauty about it that would drive all the women mad with desire. She says the left side has me just toned down enough for safety.

—Isaac Asimov



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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

Every now and then a genuine game oddity crosses my desk, something so peculiar that it cannot be ignored.

There have been games on weird subjects (from teenage aliens to teenage turtles) and semi-adventurous areas of existence (riding the New York subway). Many of these off-center games appear at the International Toy Fair, held each spring in Manhattan. People bring their dreams and a bunch of boxed games, hoping to hit it big.

Most don't. And the few striking games are often quickly acquired by the big boys on the block.

I doubt that this will be the fate of this game which, as Rod Serling might say, is presented for your approval. The game is called *Quantum Baseball* and I have, quite simply, never seen anything like it.

I saw the game at the Toy Fair—with a spiffy plastic baseball field and a deck of cards backed with some deep space objects on one side, and the normal run of suits and numbers on the other side. And since I've become inexplicably enamored of baseball—after a life spent loathing sports—I exchanged business cards with the designer, Kara Szathmary from Quebec, and moved on. Weeks later, the game arrived. And I discovered real strangeness and wonder.

But let's not pussyfoot around here. This column is only so long. *Quantum Baseball* (145 Brandy Road, Foster, Quebec, JOE 1R, Canada; $29.95) is the game of baseball as only an astrophysicist might imagine it. How is that, you say?

Kara Szathmary, who teaches algebra and calculus at a Montreal college, reduced (or enlarged, if you will) the game of baseball to a series of events. Each event impacts on each other event, much the way reality works in our universe. There are probability figures for each event, a hit, a strike, a pop fly, a grounded single, and Szathmary has created a game which is ninety-eight and one-half per cent accurate.

The game uses a plastic playing board depicting the familiar diamond shape. Szathmary uses a deck of sixty cards, a normal deck with Joker and ones added. (The ones do not represent Aces). Using the probability of various events in a game, Szathmary invented a system of playing card for pitches and hits to determine whether there is a strike, a ball or what is called an "event." If there is an event, an-

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other card is drawn and checked against a table to determine the outcome.

And that's pretty much it for the basic game. Clean, straightforward and—amazingly—it works. There's a real feel of baseball to Quantum Baseball. But then you can introduce Hit and Run plays, Stealing, Pinch Hitters, etc., all of which affect the grand equation of the game, moderated by the deck.

When a runner takes a base, his pile of cards, the balls, strikes, the event, travel with him—a record of what has happened. It also affects the probability of other events, still awaiting in the deck.

But then, when you're ready, you can use Szathmary's major invention, the Raymond Dial. With this calculating device, you can use any real batter and pitcher on a Topps, Donruss, or other baseball card, and the dial will tell you how it affects the interpretation of the cards.

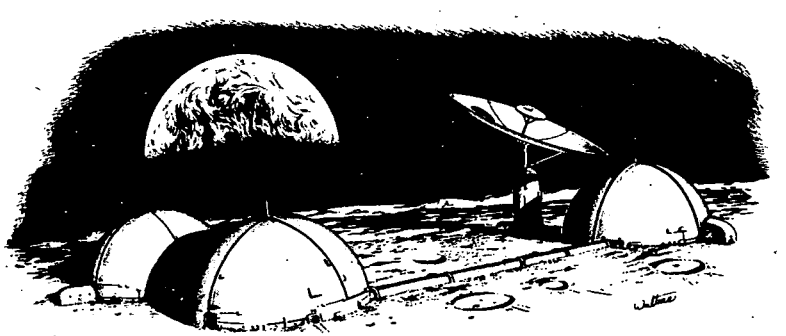
Szathmary is more than a mad baseball maven. He's also an artist, whose work has appeared in *Sky and Telescope*. He's President of the International Association for Astronomical Arts, a group of professional artists who explore the cosmos with paint, ink, and pen. Their very interesting newsletter is available from the IAAA, PO Box 1584, New York, NY 10011.

Szathmary has calculated that during a two-and-a-half hour baseball game, the earth will hurtle through space and, by the bottom of the ninth, be 180,000 kilometers closer to its rendezvous with the constellation Hercules.

Or look at it this way . . . a runner stealing a base is, Szathmary says, a case where you have three units of space with one unit of time. It's a multidimensional event!

Something to think about next time you're chomping on a hot dog and watching the Mets or the Dodgers come from behind . . .

And if you have any interest in baseball or probability, order Quantum Baseball. ●



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From the author of the critically acclaimed novel *Eon*, comes ETERNITY, an exciting new novel "of a scope to humble every man, woman, and alien" (*Chicago Tribune*).

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Also this month: LAYING THE MUSIC TO REST

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Time. ***The name of a magazine... Morris Day's backup group... a really bad SF musical... and, of course, the perfect setting for a science fiction novel.***

To use time as a place may seem out of place, at first. But consider Greg Bear's ETERNITY where alternate worlds exist along a cosmic way, and our future descendants return to manage a not-too-future Earth. Or Dean Wesley Smith's "Titantic time trap" where the same few hours are endlessly repeated. For works like these, time is the place—and the setting—for action.

If we could move backwards and forwards in time, I'd move this column to next summer—that's when I get to talk about Greg's next book QUEEN OF ANGELS. But since that only happens in science fiction, we'll all have to wait until next August!

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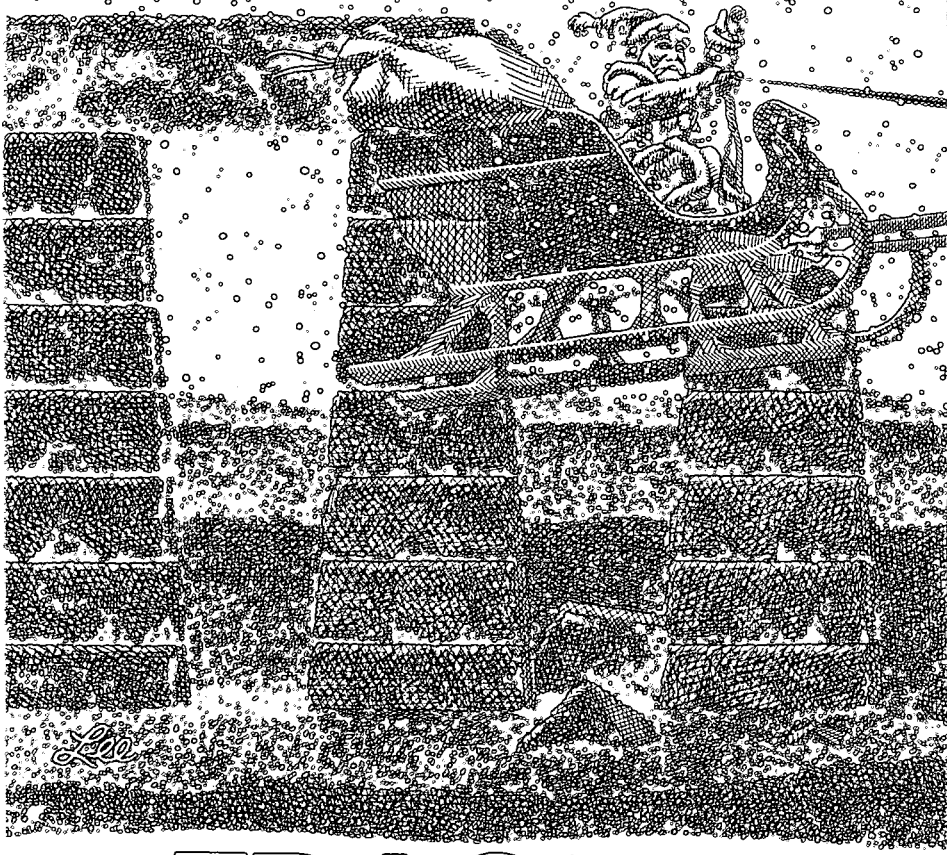

TRACKS

by Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt's previous Christmas tales, "Promises to Keep" (December 1984) and "To Hell with the Stars" (December 1987), have held out a promise of a human destiny in space. He returns to our pages now with a truly evocative look at what Christmas might mean on a cosmic scale. Mr. McDevitt's short story, "The Fort Moxie Branch," was a finalist for the 1988 Nebula award. That story is also a current nominee for the Hugo award.

art: Terry Lee

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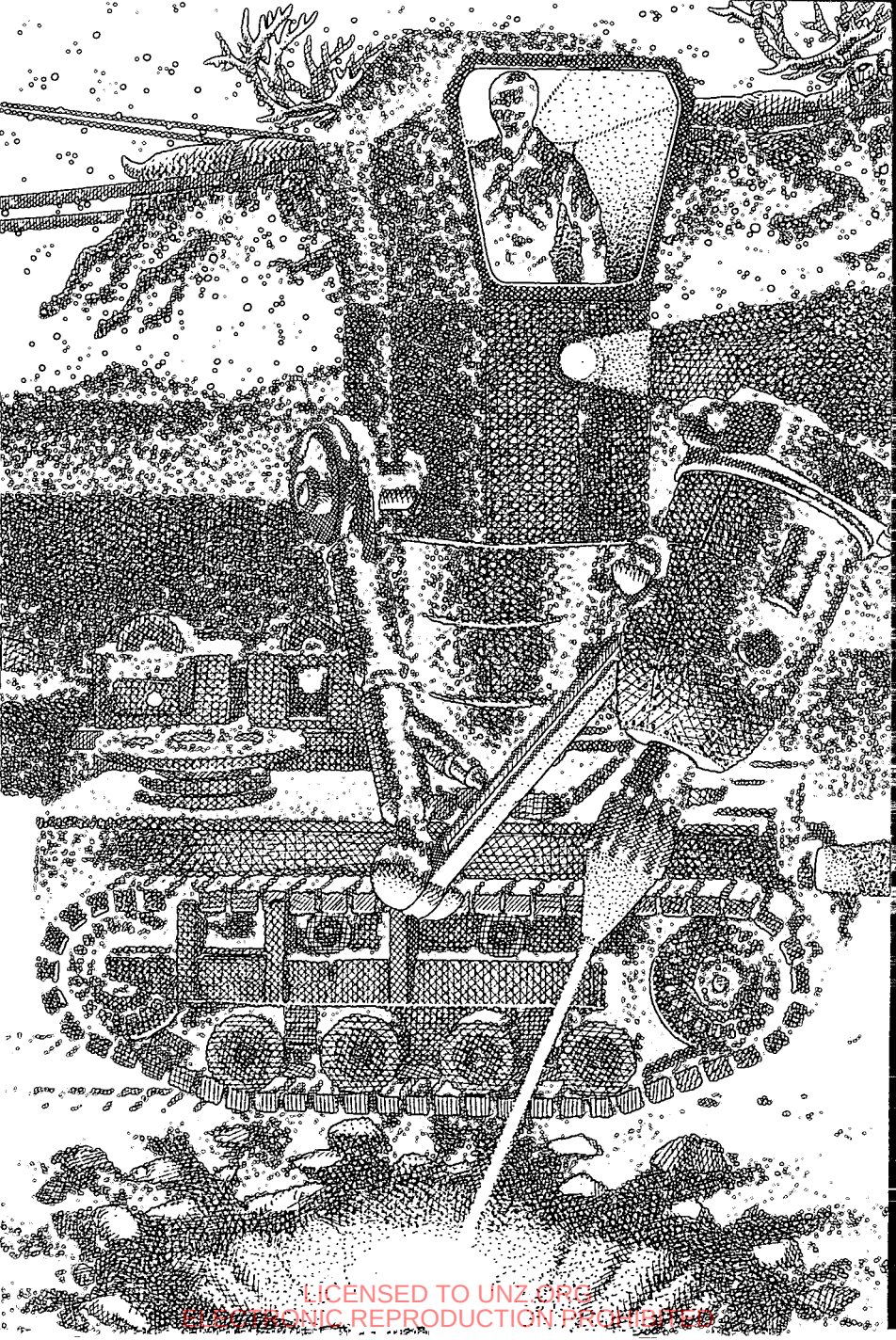

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Beneath her feet, the city lay cold and dead. She could sense its narrow avenues, its crumpled parks, its frozen geometry. Most of it was out of sight, buried, submerged, *driven* into the mantle. But a few skeletal remains had been dredged clear of the rubble, and now lay pathetically in the starlight.

Above, Hopkins' sleigh glided among the constellations. She watched it, arrowing through the sky, drifting over the distant Base, sailing down the flat plain spilling red-green light into the excavations.

She turned back to the slab. Uri Moncrief was examining it, studying the engraved symbols, drawing his fingers across the polished surface, gauging height and length (roughly four by seven meters), nodding with satisfaction as though it were possible to measure the acute angle of its significance against the mean density of the long millennia.

Here on this airless plain where no sun rose.

"The inscription," he said, moving back, thrusting his beefy hands into his pockets. He was an incongruous, undignified figure, poised before the relic in a floppy survey hat, a blazing red sport shirt, and baggy trousers. It was an impression somehow heightened by the faint aura of the gantner field that protected him from the void.

One group of heavy block symbols ran horizontally across the upper section of the slab, supported by four columns of characters beneath. "Two languages," she said. The style of the symbols in the vertical sections, formed with delicate loops and seductive flares and a kind of precise prodigality, suggested that a feminine hand might have wielded the chisel. She removed the transcorder from her belt and pointed it at the inscription. "Max, are you there?"

"Yes, Seola." The voice in the earphones was amicable and almost eager. "What can I do for you?" Max was the shipboard AI.

"Can you read this?"

Max paused. "It is not written in the local language."

"Then check the other languages," said Moncrief, not without irritation. He'd been out here too long and was in no mood for stupidity. "There has to be a correspondence somewhere."

Seola had never particularly liked Moncrief. He was too loud, and maybe too obviously smart. Too inclined to smile tolerantly at opinions that couldn't be coded, catalogued, and shipped back to a museum. "We could use a date, too, Max," she said softly.

"I'll get right back to you." The faintest hint of irritation.

Seola shivered. There'd been other dead civilizations, on other worlds. Worn out. Used up. Columns like broken teeth in the sand, monuments buried in thick forest. Even the giant habitat off Marakopa, abandoned a million years ago and left adrift with all its hatches open. But nothing like this. She turned up the heat inside her field.

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"We should give it up for the night," grumbled Moncrief. "There must be a better way to spend Christmas Eve."

Yes. Any way would be better.

The ship circuit cut in. "Seola." Pointedly not addressing Moncrief, who was senior.

He responded. "Go ahead, Max."

Seola touched her remote, and the light from the digger went out. Under the stars, the inscription glowed softly. "It dates from the Event itself," said Max, "with a tolerance of half a century on either side. The horizontal portion is from Elian B. Incidentally, I've found the rock formation the slab was taken from. It's about twelve kilometers west. In those low hills just on the horizon. It looks as if it was cut out with a laser."

"Not possible," said Moncrief.

Seola smiled, sensing that Max was baiting him. The culture on this world had not lived long enough to produce even a printing press.

"You sure about the Elian B result?" Moncrief looked perplexed.

"Yes. No doubt about it."

"The center of that language," offered Seola, "was several thousand kilometers away. During the period when this was a living world, it would have been on another continent. A substantial distance in a non-technological society."

"What does it say?" asked Moncrief.

"The horizontal passage translates roughly as *In the Heart of the Forest, the Water Is Always Clear.*"

Moncrief sighed.

"I don't quite know what to make of it," Max added.

The face and one side of the slab were smooth; everything else was rough-hewn. "This *must* be a memorial," Seola said. "If it is, then we can expect figurative sentiments."

"For example?"

"*The water is always clear.* Something unchanging. Probably, *We Will Never Forget. In Eternal Remembrance.* Something like that."

Moncrief laughed. "*We Will Not Forget,*" he said. The laughter was a harsh, unnatural sound in her phones.

"What's funny?" Seola asked, surprised at the edge in her voice.

"The heart of the forest? Take a look around." The plain lay cold and unbroken to the horizon. "And it's the only thing left standing on this entire world? *We Will Not Forget?"* He tugged at his belt. "It can't predate the cataclysm by more than a few decades. And it survives. Like Ozymandias."

"Yes," she said.

"What about the rest of it, Max?"

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"The vertical characters seem to be unique. As far as I can determine, none of the known languages of this world used them."

"Then we have a new language," said Moncrief.

"So it would seem. The sample is of course too short to permit analysis."

"Okay." He rubbed the back of his neck. "That's enough. Let's save it for later. Time to join the party." He seized one of the mounts and climbed onto the digger. The gantner field quivered with the sudden motion. Reflections from her yellow torch gleamed back at her.

She stood, not moving, watching the sleigh. It seemed out of place here, a cynical ghost, a brutal mockery. It banked past a ruined colonnade, trailing stardust. Its driver waved, and the team of reindeer clawed at the sky.

Moncrief glanced at the apparition, apparently noticing it for the first time. "Hop does a nice job," he said with admiration.

"Sure," she said. More than just the sleigh. The Base was surrounded by his holographic creations: spruce trees strung with blue and red lights, a stable beneath a brilliant white star, and a Victorian storefront labeled "Scrooge & Marley."

We Will Not Forget. The characters were defiant. Proud.

My God.

Moncrief started the digger. "Seola," he said, impatiently.

She swung toward him, angry, not knowing why. And dropped the transcorder. The instrument fell out of the gantner field and bounced away.

"Uh-oh," said Moncrief. "That'll cost you a month's pay. It won't be worth a damn by the time you get it back to the Base."

She stared at it. The field couldn't be penetrated from the *outside,* so she had no easy way to recover the device. She hesitated, looked at Moncrief (who seemed once again absorbed with his own thoughts), and fingered the controls at her belt. How long would it take the near-absolute zero temperatures to freeze the liquid crystals? She took a deep breath, picked up the transcorder, and shut the field off. The energy barrier would require a few seconds to dissipate sufficiently to allow her to retrieve it. The cold hit immediately. It was a physical, solid reality, a wall. Moncrief shouted her name, his voice distorted. Eyes pressed tight, she counted to four, all she could stand, and reactivated. The field reformed around her *and* the transcorder.

"My God, Seola, you're a lunatic."

She was on her knees. Her head was beginning to throb, and she had trouble getting her eyes open. But she managed a grin.

In her headphones: "Uri—" The base watch officer. "Everything okay?"

Moncrief was beside her, guiding her into a sitting position: "Relax, Cal. We're on our way."

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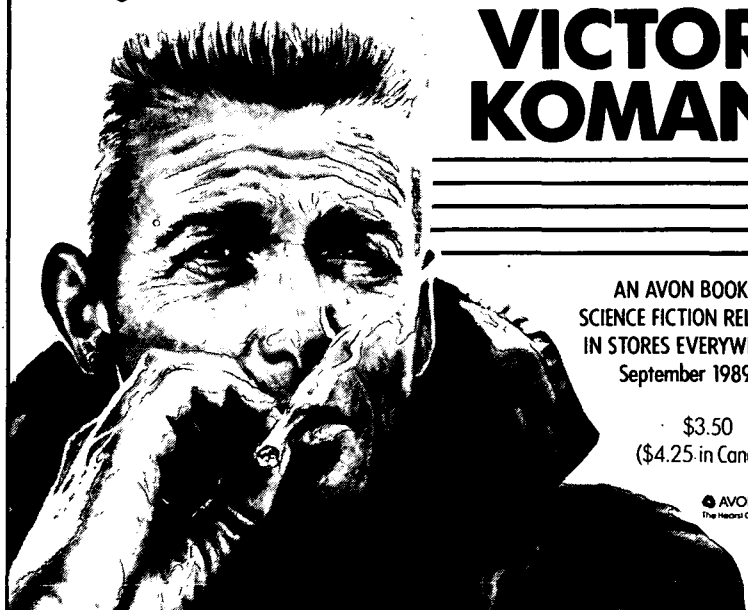
THE JEHOVAH CONTRACT

VICTOR KOMAN



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Behind the voice, she could hear singing. *Joy to the World.* Laughter. People talking. *Never get it right,* someone was saying. And another voice: *Tell them the beer's getting warm.*

Moncrief's eyes were narrow. Angry. Worried. He switched to a side channel: "You do anything like that again, and I'll have you sent back to the classroom. You understand?"

The slab was rotating slowly around her, tilting. She tried to lie down, but Moncrief held her tight.

During those slippery moments, it occurred to her that she was overlooking something.

The sleigh dwindled to a bright glowing point, cruising the low rim of hills in the east. Rendolion lay in its track, cold and pale, once this world's sun, now indistinguishable from a thousand other lights sprinkled across the night sky.

They had been to Rendolion. It was an ancient class G, unusual in that no planets existed. There *were* rocks and comets, drifting in eccentric orbits. Debris, the astronomers had said with glee. There'd been an Event. Something had disrupted the system. To their intense disappointment, however, they were unable to locate a candidate among the visible stars. That meant, almost certainly, a collapsed black body of some sort. Undetectable without prolonged search and some luck.

She tried to imagine the terror that must have gripped the inhabitants of this lush world of river valley cultures, a people still in their flat earth stage, who had not even the consolation of understanding what was happening to them. Unprecedented quakes and storms wrecked their shining cities. Coastal areas sank beneath waves and tides. The skies turned cold and hard, and the sun, if anyone was left to see, grew twisted and sick.

She knew these people. She'd read their histories and literature. They'd brawled and laughed and copulated and debated ethics and death by sunlit pools. They'd invented stories to account for the natural marvels of their world. Their gods were an admirable sort, compassionate and gentle. What must the worshippers have thought during those final days when their prayers brought no help?

The plain had no horizon: its dark glassy surface touched the stars.

"Did you know they had a Christmas, too?"

His hand pressed her forehead. Not that it would matter: she could be burning up, and he would get no evidence of it through the field. But it felt good anyhow. Reassuring. "Every intelligent species seems to have solstice festivals," he said carefully. "Can't think of any that don't."

"I wasn't thinking about astronomy, or mistletoe and spruce trees," she said. She climbed unsteadily to her feet.

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He seemed satisfied, and made no move to stop her.

The slab. She approached it, laid her palms against it, and her cheek. Who had carved the intricate characters? What had happened to the being who had so carefully and lovingly erected this monument? She drew her fingertips across the inscription, pressed them into the grooves, traced the letters. "There's an implied promise in Christmas," she said. She was walking the edge of a void far vaster than the one in which this unfortunate world drifted. She wanted to stop, say no more. But the words came in a rush. "There's supposed to be a point to life. Existence has a meaning. Here—" Tears stung her eyes. "There's nothing left of these people but rubble." Her voice broke.

Moncrief was uncharacteristically silent for a time. Then, choosing his words carefully, he said, "There *is* no meaning, Seola. You know that as well as I do. Look, over here." He directed her lantern toward the digger. "Behind it. What do you see?"

She looked. "Nothing."

He pointed at the marks broken into the brittle ground by the big vehicle. "In another ten thousand years or so, somebody else may come along, and wonder who made those tracks."

She frowned. "What's your point?"

"That might be all that's left of *us*."

She laughed. "That's crazy, Uri."

"Okay," he said. "Maybe so. But it will sure as hell be all that's left of you and me. Probably, considering local conditions, the only permanent trace of our passage anywhere. So where's the meaning for us?"

We Will Not Forget.

She turned away from him. "It's not the same thing at all." Yet she could not quite seize the difference. And she was left with the irony of the two of them locked forever within the darkness cast by this Ozymandian wall. "It can't be," she said abruptly.

"What do you mean? What can't be?"

"Perfect irony. That *this* would be the only thing left unburied. Uri, why this and not an army post? Or a farmhouse?"

Moncrief looked tired. "Coincidence."

"Not possible," she said. "What's under here?"

He looked down at his feet, as though the bleak surface might offer some clue. "More of the same, I'd think. Rock and ruins."

Seola opened a channel to the ship. "Max."

"Here."

"Get a fix on us, and give me a thermal analysis of the immediate area. Say, out to about fifty meters, all directions."

Moncrief exhaled. "What's the point?"

"Not sure."

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He looked at her intently. Moncrief was big. Not tall, but heavy in a muscular sort of way. "You all right?"

"Yes."

"Seola." It was Max. His voice sounded strange. "I'm getting an odd reading."

"Go ahead."

"Analysis is unclear, but there's something down there. Immediately below you."

"A building?"

"A metallic structure. Parts of it crushed. Scattered. Hard to tell what it looked like originally."

Seola studied the gray, flat plain. It glimmered in the starlight.

"Metallic?" Moncrief shook his head. "That can't be."

"Why not?" said Seola. "They had metals."

"For weapons and tools. Not for building. Max, how deep is it?"

"There are extrusions. I would say it is the product of a technologically sophisticated society. Not like anything this world should have produced." Pause. "The point closest to the surface is about five meters down. It appears to be quite large, by the way. The original object may have been two hundred meters long. Fragments are distributed out to five kilometers."

Seola looked back at the wall. "Uri, what happened here?"

"Fragments? Sounds like an explosion. But these people had no gunpowder."

"Then what?"

"Max, take control of the digger and cut through for us. We want a look at it."

"Cut through where?"

"Find a section that's reasonably intact."

"Okay. Stay clear."

The power lamp on the digger glowed red. Working lights came on. The machine turned sixty degrees, rumbled off across the plain. It traveled about three-quarters of a kilometer. They walked behind it. Seola noted that only Moncrief was heavy enough to break through the frozen soil and leave footprints.

The unit stopped. "Here," said Max.

"Go ahead. We're out of the way."

Silent white light sliced into the rock. Max modulated the beam, repositioned the lasers, adjusted the power. A small cloud of dust formed, expanded, and enveloped the digger. The ground shook. The machine was eerily illuminated within the cloud.

* * *

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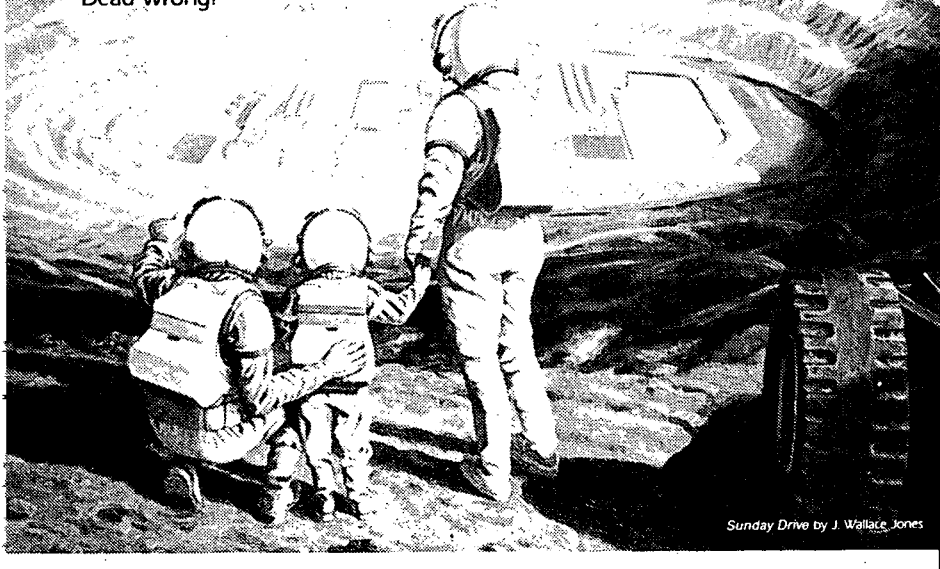

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They climbed down into the pit. One of its walls was metal. It was blackened and pocked and scored.

"It doesn't belong here," said Moncrief.

"We can use the digger to cut through." She set the lamp down, and examined the surface. "It curves," she said.

"Hey." Moncrief's voice rose an octave. "Door." He pushed on it. "It's partially open."

Seola fumbled at her tools, found a bar, inserted it, and pulled. "You try," she said.

The pit was narrow. They changed places, clumsily, so he could get leverage. Then he put his weight to the bar. The door gave. Stopped. Broke loose.

She seized the lantern and thrust it inside. And stood, blocking the entrance she was in a small compartment, crowded with instrument panels. Two *things* that looked like giant insects sat in chairs before a crushed console. They were long dead, of course. And they would have been repulsive even had they *not* been partially decomposed. Moncrief gripped her shoulders and moved her gently aside.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Damned if I know. Not like anything we've seen here." He bent over, examined each of the corpses, and then turned his attention to the panels.

Seola opened a channel to the Base.

"Yo," said the watch officer. They were still singing and he sounded a trifle drunk. "Seola, where the hell are you?"

"Cal, we've got something. You'll want to get a team over here."

He laughed. "Come on, Seola. Get serious. Nobody's working tonight."

Moncrief broke in: "Cal. Forget the party and get some people over here. You'll need Kris—" He began ticking off names.

Seola was playing her lantern around the compartment. "It's a cockpit."

She approached the corpses. The heads were dark green, leathery, with stalked eyes and (she thought) an expression of unbridled malevolence. They seemed to have eight limbs, no pair alike. And they wore identical tattered garments that had once been uniforms. Gray black, probably, but difficult to be sure. "Where'd they come from? They aren't even remotely like the natives. And riding a truck, for God's sake. Or an ocean liner, for all we know."

They were remarkably well preserved. Even in a void, one would expect a fairly thorough deterioration from the corpse's own chemistry.

Moncrief had drifted toward the rear bulkhead. "There's a hatch back here," he said.

It would have been a trifle low for Moncrief, and maybe even for her. She realized at that moment how small the creatures in the cabin were. The door was sealed, and Moncrief was tugging at it even as the danger

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flashed through her mind: it might be under pressure. "Uri—" It was all she got out.

She heard his cry, felt the tremor in the narrow compartment. Then the thing let go: the hatch ripped into him, the lights went off, and she was hurled over a console into a bulkhead. She was down, ribs aching, left arm numb, sliding into a faint, thinking that there would be trouble over this, that they'd damaged an irreplaceable artifact.

She saw a red glow. It moved. Flickered. Went out. Then there was only the blue-white aura of her own field.

Moncrief.

"Uri?"

Nothing.

The hatch: his energy level would have surged to protect him from it. Maybe blown out. "Uri?" Louder this time, desperate. One hand closed on a dry, raspy husk. One of the aliens. She shuddered, crawled across the floor, calling his name.

Somewhere, Cal's voice. "In trouble," she said. "Mayday." And then she found him, crumpled in a heap, one hand flung over his face, the other gripping the belt control.

When she touched him, he spasmed.

She tried to pry his fingers loose, to get at the stud. But he held tight. No way.

His eyes were shut. Flesh looked blue. That would be from the glow of her field. But it was hard. Freezing fast.

"On our way," said Cal. "What's the problem?"

My God, what could she *do?*

"Seola?"

She got down beside Moncrief. (The deck was carpeted, the material stiff and bristly.) She pressed close to him, squeezed his hand in an effort to tell him she was there. And shut off her field.

Four seconds.

"Seola, are you all right?" Cal's voice was different now, distant, tinny, carried only by vibration. "We're coming. About ten minutes."

It wouldn't work. Two. No way it could protect them both.

Moncrief jerkily gripped her arm. Held on. Three.

Light outside in the pit. Max was showing them the way.

She activated, felt the warm womb of the field form over them, drive back the night and the terrible cold.

Moncrief trembled violently. A jolt of sudden pain drew a gasp from her. Ribs.

Breathe. It was hard to breathe.

Moncrief struggled for air. Tried to speak.

"What?" she said. "What, Uri?"

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"—Not enough for both— Back off."

The air pumps were loud. Straining.

"Field's too thin—"

Yes: heat and air were leaking out. He was trying to push her away. Get away from her.

She held on. "They're coming," she said. "Just a few minutes."

"Lunatic."

She buried her head in his shirt, and locked her hands around his neck.

It got colder. And darker. Her last thought as she went under: *"Never forget—"*

"No," breathed Moncrief.

"It was an aircraft." He looked a little beat up, and he was wearing a bypass rig that suggested he'd sustained brain damage. One ear was sealed. "I'll be okay," he said, in a scratchy whisper.

A Christmas wreath hung on one wall. "How about me?" she asked.

Moncrief grinned. "I'm supposed to let them know when you come out of it. You broke a couple ribs, and they expect you've lost some memory. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yeah," she said, drawing the word out. "You and me in the cave, right?"

"An aircraft," he said again.

"Yes," she said. "But it makes no sense. How—?"

"The main compartments were filled with bodies. The locals though, not the creatures at the controls. We think they were trying to manage a rescue—"

"Who?"

"We don't know who. *Somebody*. From off-world, if you ask me. It has to be. Or we have the first case of a technologically-superior society allowing everybody else to run things. Apparently they crashed."

She was a bit confused. "What good would a plane have been?"

"Get people to a central point, I suppose. Maybe airborne transfers. Who knows? There're tapes in the cockpit, but they're damaged and no one can understand them."

"It went down during the catastrophe."

"Yes. Whoever came must have stayed with them to the end. Got as many off as they could."

"Uri, even assuming you're right, how many people could you save with one aircraft?"

Moncrief shrugged. "McHale found sixteen more outside Tharif, and Sinjuan another dozen in Massai. The evidence is they were intact when they were abandoned. There are probably more."

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She reached up, ecstatic, tugged his head down, and kissed him. "The gods responded," she said.

"In the manner of gods everywhere," he nodded, "they needed a lot of help." But she saw her own pleasure reflected in his gray eyes.

They were silent for a time, and Seola found herself thinking about the digger's tracks, and the single set of footprints in the machine's wake, where they both had walked.

Never Forget.

"Did they find any other crewmen? On *our* aircraft?"

"Yes," he said. "There were two more in back. With the passengers."

She looked at him. "Four," she said.

"Yes. *Four.*"

The slab. "There were *four* columns."

Moncrief nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. We assumed the slab went up *before* the general disaster."

"Someone came back," she said. "To say thanks."

He squeezed her hand. "Me too. Merry Christmas." ●

JUPITER ITSELF

Talk with awe of Jupiter, if you talk at all.
Gigantic beyond comprehension, furious
Past human fury, radiant, alone
Along the lines of arctic stillness,
And foreign in its dominance by gravitation,
It writhes
The way a fetus on the edge of birth
Will writhe expectantly, & natural.

The great begin as shadows of the sun
And grow in frantic pulses
Which regenerate themselves
In red & yellow whirlpools,
Periods of light & dark.
Talk with awe of Jupiter: it wants to be a sun.

—Jack Daw

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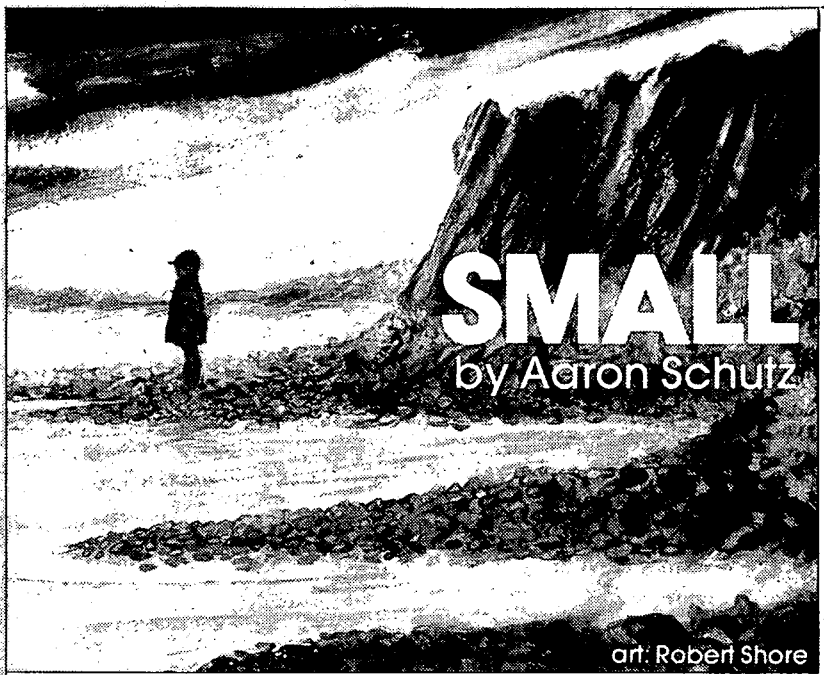

"Small" is Aaron Schutz's second sale to a professional publication. His first, "Beyond the Seventh Sphere," appeared in *Full Spectrum*. Originally from Eugene, Oregon, Mr. Schutz is currently at work on an MA in writing at New York University.

A boy walked along the beach in search of a pebble. Ten years old, he was as small as five, sneakers barely leaving an imprint in the hard dark sand, cold wind whisking up wet strands of what was left of his blond hair.

The boy loved the sea. Clean and huge, it seemed to him the soul of emptiness and adventure. A bad thing was far away; he felt it seeking him. He pried a pebble from the sand, small and smooth and dark, indistinguishable from the many others, and it seemed as he looked up again that he himself was a pebble to that great wide water. Anything could happen in a place like that. It was there that he was most small.

When his father came to find him, he returned with his pebble clenched tight in the fist deep in his pants pocket. As they drove away, his mother told him that he shouldn't be sad, that they would come back next year. He was not sad. She lied a little lie, but he liked small things.

They came to a special apartment near the doctors' place, where he

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was given special food. When they went to see the doctors he always took his pebble and concentrated on being small.

"You must be very brave so you will grow to be a big man," one of the doctors told him. The boy knew doctors. He didn't like them. He wanted to be small.

He knew:

Small things are very precious. You must look close to see small things. Small boys get hugs. You cannot be with a small boy and be far away. Small boys can slip away and no one will notice. Doughnuts are bigger for small boys.

The doctors were always doing things. He was scared of them, but he didn't say so. They said he was brave, but he wasn't being brave—he was being small. When they put the needle in his back, he held tight to his pebble and whispered: *Small, small, small, small. . . .* You are smaller if you are quiet. You are smaller if you don't scream.

Listen:

There was a big boy at school who would tease him because of his hair, because he was small. But the small boy could slip away and lie in the tall grass and hide underneath the steps where no one else could go and the big boy could not find him.

When he was feeling very sick and the doctors did not see him anymore, people with smiles came and asked him, "What do you want? You can have anything you want." He didn't feel very good; he was having trouble being small. Big things make it easier.

He wanted the sea.

His mother and father wanted to be with him when he went to the beach, but it is easier to be small if you are alone. He wore dark jeans and a dark coat; you are smaller if you are dark.

He stood on the beach in the rain. He felt very sick. The bad thing was out there, very close, looking for him. He held his pebble tightly. *I am small. I am a pebble in this sea.*

And though the bad thing looked and looked, it could not find him.

His parents came later, and they could not find him either. They seemed sad, and he wanted to wave to them, to say goodbye, to tell them that it was all right—the bad thing couldn't get him because he was so small, and you are smaller if no one sees you.

He plays there still, and though the bad thing searches angrily for him like some strange big boy, it cannot find him. He is as small as a pebble among the thousands in the sea grass, out on the wide empty edge of the sea. ●

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By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly. . . .
—William Stafford, "Traveling Through the Dark" *

That day at the frayed end of October was another raw, gray day, and I had to mark midterms. We felt that on such days our midget wood stove more than justified all its aggravations: the removing, insulating, and replacing of the oak paneling above the fireplace so the local fire marshal would let us vent the stove into the chimney, the negotiations with chiseling dealers in cordwood, the chronic mess of bark bits on the carpet. The installers had sworn it was the smallest stove they had ever, not only put in, but *seen*. We had to special-order short firewood for it, but it was phenomenally efficient and cute as a toy. Ordinarily my husband and I took turns working on the high-backed sofa in front of it; but whichever of us brought home a set of papers to grade always got the stove. Not only was its coziness a comfort, but the endless tinkerings and adjustings required to keep it cooking along at a flue temperature of 400 degrees were a grateful distraction, broke up the strain of the chore.

So early that October morning I had laid claim to the stove. I'd emptied the ashes, carried in kindling and split logs till the woodbox was heaped full, cleaned the window panel, stoked the firebox, and adjusted the catalytic unit and the baffle; and when there was no further help for it I squared my shoulders and settled down on the sofa with a stack of essay exams from my course in contemporary American poetry, while red flames swirled cheerily behind glass a couple of feet away.

Nothing but grim self-discipline gets you through the first paper or two; after that you sink into a sort of judgmental trance and things go better. Matt left for the day. I poked the coals occasionally, put in wood, fine-tuned the two dampers, wrote things in margins and at the bottoms of last pages. The phone rang only once: a student who hadn't turned in the take-home half of the exam on Monday needed directions so he could bring it out to the house. The call was my only interruption, and when I finally stopped for a sandwich and a glass of cider I had completed five exams, a quarter of the class and an excellent long morning's work. Two more, I promised myself, and then you don't have to do any more till tonight.

But after lunch the first paper I picked up had something wrong with it.

The paper started off in the usual way to address the second of four multiple-choice questions I had set the class on Monday, but the second

* Excerpted from "Traveling Through the Dark" © 1977 by William Stafford. Reprinted from *Stories That Could Be True*, Harper & Row. Used by permission of the author.

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page veered off weirdly; I found myself skimming over references to nuclear power and some future disaster, and stopped, groaning aloud, at a statement to the effect that alien invaders alone would save us from utter destruction. Alien invaders! I looked at the name on the paper and groaned again. Terry Carpenter was the kid on his way over with the late take-home question.

That didn't give me a lot of time to figure out what to do.

Flipping back to page one I began to read closely, cursing to myself. It is far from uncommon for undergraduates at a high-pressure university—especially if they happen to be somewhat unstable to start with—to have an "episode" of some sort at the semester's midpoint, when so many written assignments come due at the same time and so many midterm exams are given. I'd known cases of suicide threats and even attempts (none successful, thank God), of depression, inability to work, inability to cope generally. It's far from uncommon, but you always hope it won't happen to anybody in your own classes, because midway through the semester professors are as weary as their students, and longing every bit as much for the brief Thanksgiving hiatus still three weeks distant. The last thing you want just then is more work, and troubled students create work. You have to investigate, make assessments, do something. You can't ignore it, and wouldn't if you could. But you'd love to be spared the whole problem.

The question Terry had chosen to write on required him to compare and contrast Elizabeth Bishop's lovely poem "The Moose," in which a bus full of people traveling to Boston from Nova Scotia encounters a female moose in the moonlit New Brunswick woods, with William Stafford's much shorter, pithier poem "Traveling Through the Dark," about a man who finds a car-killed doe beside a road, her fawn still alive inside her. The class had studied the Bishop piece but "Traveling Through the Dark" had been sprung on them the day of the exam. The elements common to both poems—driving at night, confrontation between vehicle and animal and human and animal, powerful human responses to the confrontations, etc.—made it natural and easy to view the two in the light of one another, while their differences of length, tone, content, form, and purpose made the qualities of each stand out in relief against those of the other. To me it had seemed at once the easiest and the most interesting question of the four.

But something about it had mightily disturbed Terry Carpenter, that was clear: "... up the hill all the trees are broken, dead, sick, and stunted; the deer were wiped out completely by radiation so there are none for the alien to see on that side of the lens, and when the buck came then I felt sick too to think all that power and beauty would really come to nothing no matter how hard he chases the does now, whatever fawns he makes will all be dead or theirs will be, somewhere down the line

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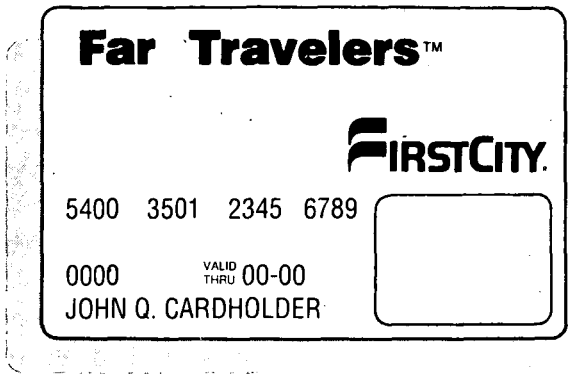
The Shape of Things to Come



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every one of them is doomed to be killed by our stupidity, every one, so that he seemed a beautiful sorrowful wasted doomed creature . . ." For pages it went on like that, the quasi-poetical style, and punctuation by commas only, giving an odd trancelike quality to the writing. It was not a style I would have expected a student like Terry to use, or even be capable of. My attention kept veering away from the sense of the paper—if it could be said to have a "sense" exactly—though I read it through three times. Terry had certainly failed to answer the question, but what was it he had done instead?

A glance at the stove made me jump up; while I'd been fretting over Terry's exam the needle of the round red thermometer had swung back to 275 degrees. Pulling on leather gloves, I hastily poked the glowing coals into a flat bed, then threw in a fistful of small sticks and splits to hot it up enough for the chunkier lengths of ash and Osage orange to catch well. Then I closed the little iron door, spun the damper wide open, and waited on my knees while the fire picked up strength, trying anxiously to remember how Terry had sounded on the phone. I hadn't been struck by anything strange in his voice, but had been in such a hurry to get off the line that unless the strangeness had been very evident I probably wouldn't have noticed.

Actually, beyond acknowledging his perfectly competent classroom performance, I had taken very little notice of Terry Carpenter at all. The only grade I'd recorded for him was a B on a short written poetry explication. He had never come to any office hour of mine, nor (until now) done anything to make a personal impression. At mid-semester one is impressed chiefly with the A students and the disruptive or idiotic ones; distinguishing among the B's takes longer unless unusual looks or behavior separate them out, or they make a point of coming in to confer about something. None of these things was true of Terry. I realized that in fact I knew nothing whatever about the boy.

I stopped fussing with the stove, tossed the gloves into the woodbox, and called my husband's office: not in. Then I tried the department Chair and was told by her secretary that she would be in a committee meeting all afternoon; and before I could ask the secretary to search the records for Terry Carpenter's file—in case he should happen to be an English major, with a file there in her office—I heard a car door slam outside.

Ready or not, then, here we went.

Terry and I arrived at our opposite sides of the front door at the same instant. A large, gleaming car, its engine wastefully running, bulked in the drive behind my rust-pocked ten-year-old Toyota. When I pulled the door open Terry said "Hi!" brightly, thrust a manila envelope into my hand, and began at once to sidle away, saying "Sorry to bother you at home and sorry this didn't get in on time." In spite of these apologies he

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was grinning in a relieved, if tired and rueful, way—like any student happy to have disburdened himself of a task. He wore jeans and an expensive corduroy coat, unbuttoned, with a dark, plush collar. His hair was mussed and he hadn't shaved, typical signs of late-paper production. In those circumstances nobody could have looked more normal.

Even his rush to get away was normal. I almost let him go—but couldn't quite shrug off the strangeness of what he had written, and a few judicious questions wouldn't take us long. "Could you come in for a couple of minutes? Something I'd like to ask you about your in-class exam." I made it more of a command than a request.

"Oh—" Terry said, "okay, I guess," but his grin disappeared. "But I better go turn off the engine first. My roommate's car," he added almost with embarrassment, having probably taken note of the shabby resident Toyota. He certainly bore no resemblance I could see to a young man on the brink of nervous collapse; for one thing he seemed insufficiently self-absorbed.

When he came in I shut the door firmly behind him, went to the kitchen sink, and filled and plugged in the electric kettle, saying "Tea?" in a perfunctory way while Terry—seeing he was not going to be about to escape in a hurry—took off his coat and threw it over a chair. "Thanks. Uh, is something wrong with my midterm, or what?"

"Tell you in a minute." I clattered cups and spoons and things together, filling time. When the kettle boiled I made the tea quickly, popped a cozy over the pot, and carried the laden tray into the living room, my problem trailing uncomfortably after me. "Have a seat." I dropped onto the other end of the sofa, plucked his paper from the top of the stack, and looked him in the eye. "Okay, Terry. It would be better to tell me the truth: were you high on something while you were writing this?"

"God, *no*." He sat up very straight, obviously alarmed—but again, to my practiced eye, no more so than any student might be if challenged thus bluntly, without warning. "That is—just on coffee, I'd been up most of the night trying to do the take-home. Jesus. Why'd you ask me that?"

"Ever drop acid? Sorry to pry, but I need to know."

"Well—just once. In high school."

"Bad trip?"

"No, not at all. I just wanted to see what it was like, though, I never did it again."

"And no recurrences."

Thoroughly worried now, he leaned back against the sofa's padded arm, away from me, and shook his head. "Why are we talking about drugs? What's all this got to do with the midterm?"

"That's what I was hoping you could tell *me*." I handed him the paper. He read quickly through the first sheet and flipped to the second; watch-

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ing narrowly as his eyes ran down the page, I saw him frown and his face get whiter. He went on to the third page, threw a frightened glance at me, began to read the fourth. His breathing had become rapid and shallow.

Abruptly he looked up, letting the pages crumple in his lap. "I don't know what to say. I just don't get it."

"Do you remember writing this?"

"N-no . . . not actually *writing* it, no I don't. I felt very weird on Monday, I'd been up most of the night for two nights running, and sort of felt like I might be coming down with something."

"You *did* write it, though, didn't you?" I pressed him; I had to know.

Terry said in agitation, "Well *yeah*, I *wrote* it, I mean I must have, it's my handwriting, but I don't *remember* writing it, I swear to God!"

"Well, what's your explanation then?"

He looked ready to cry. "Well . . ." shifting in his seat, "I could've been in worse shape than I thought, I guess. I don't know, maybe I was running a fever or something."

"But you feel all right now?"

"Before I read *this* I did. I got a lot of sleep Monday night."

I thought a minute while Terry hunched tensely beside me and the tea steeped on, ignored. "Well then. Granted that you don't remember writing this paper, do you recognize the content of it—that is, is it like anything you might have read sometime in a science fiction book, say, or seen on the late show?"

"That's the creepiest part," he said huskily. "I sort of do recognize it. I had a . . . dream, I guess. I guess it was a dream, it must've been."

"When was that?"

"Last weekend sometime. Around then. I'd completely forgotten about it till you showed me this thing."

"Terry, this looks pretty serious to me," I said. "Maybe you've been working a little too hard lately? Or having personal problems?" He made no reply to this, and why after all should he tell me anything? "Whatever the source of the stress, I think it would be smart to talk to somebody at Student Health about it, show them this exam and say you blanked out and wrote it on automatic, if that's what you think you did."

I stopped. Terry was no longer listening; he had bent double, elbows on knees, head gripped hard in both hands. I had to lean forward too, to hear him: "It might not've been a dream." He rocked slightly, back and forth. "Something might have happened. In the park . . . oh Jesus, all of a sudden my head's just splitting."

"You don't mean aliens *really* invaded?"

I instantly regretted this feeble attempt at reassurance; Terry snapped that he didn't *know* what the hell he meant and rocked harder, almost

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whimpering. "Could you—have you got some aspirins or something? I can't think straight."

"I'll get you a couple. Can you take them with tea? Pour us both some tea, will you, it ought to be ready by now." I dashed upstairs to the medicine cabinet and down again with the Bufferin bottle, and when Terry had dosed himself and was nursing his cup, and I had emptied mine, I said "Okay, I apologize for the wisecrack. Tell me what you meant about the 'park'—what park?"

"The state park, up north of here. I'll try to explain, but I feel so *weird*—I can't remember right—I—oh, Christ," he choked, getting up frantically, "I think I'm going to—where's the bathroom?" and rushed away, following the directions I called after him.

"Something must really be wrong with me," he said when he had come slowly back downstairs. "I *never* do that. Could I have a couple more Bufferins?" He tried a wobbly smile. "Those ones weren't down long enough to do any good."

I shook two more tablets into his palm. "Drink it *slowly*. Okay. About the park, if you feel up to talking."

Terry slumped back and turned his face, handsome under its greenish cast and stubble, toward me. "Well, I went out there early Sunday morning, hoping to think of a way to do the take-home part of the midterm—I was having a terrible time deciding what to write on for some reason. I spent hours trying on Saturday, practically the whole day and way into the night. Then I passed out for a couple of hours, and when I woke up it was about five o'clock and I suddenly felt like getting out of the city—maybe a little fresh air might blow the cobwebs away, you know? So I borrowed my roommate's car—that one, out there—and drove out to this park. I stopped at a Dunkin Donuts on the way and got some coffee and a bag of blueberry muffins . . . and I parked and got out and walked around for a while. It was just getting light."

"Why so much trouble with the midterm? It wasn't that hard."

"I'm not sure, except I had two other midterms last week and a paper due on Friday, and I might have been getting kind of burned out. Last night I just sat down and *wrote* it, no problem."

"Wait a minute." I had gotten up to tend the stove; now I propped the poker in the corner, slid the paper he had brought me out of its envelope, and glanced through it: a perfectly straightforward, perfectly unexceptionable exercise. No aliens, no disasters. "Okay. So you drove out to the park. Where'd you leave the car?"

"Down by the creek, in the Sycamore Mills lot. You know? My Dad used to take me there when I was little, when we lived out here and he worked in the city. He loved that park, he loved to see the deer. It's funny, but I hadn't been there for years, not since my parents split up,

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but I still remembered the exact layout of the trails and how to get there from Route 1."

Here my ears pricked up: an episode triggered by some traumatic childhood association seemed suggested by these details. I said, "I go over there all the time myself, it's my favorite place to run. So you walked up Sycamore Mills Road along the creek, carrying your muffins and sipping your coffee. What then?"

"Well, I stayed on the road as far as it follows the creek, to the foot of the White Trail—" he looked at me and I nodded; I knew the White Trail well "—and then I just hiked up that a little ways, to the big boulder-things in the woods at the top of the hill?"—another glance; another nod—"and climbed up on one of them and—just sat there for a while. For quite a while, I guess, eating a muffin or three and trying to think about Robert Penn Warren's narrative poetry without getting anywhere *at* all. And then I—went back to the car and drove home," he finished in a rush, rubbing his hands over his face and through his dark tousled hair, face scrunched into a mask, all teeth and tension lines. "No I didn't! That's what I *remember* doing, but while I was reading this paper I got a jumble of—images, pictures, like dream pictures against the background of the woods up there. Jesus, my head's about to come *off*."

"You'd only had a couple of hours' sleep, you said. Might you have dozed off for a few minutes?"

"Maybe, but . . . it was *cold* up there, you know? Six, seven o'clock in the morning—and anyway I don't remember writing *any* of this stuff after the first page, not a word of it, but yet these pictures kept flicking through my mind when I read it over—something *did* happen out there on Sunday, I know it did, I can feel it—" his voice squeaked up abruptly and he clutched his head again, really whimpering now in spite of himself with the apparent ferociousness of the pain in his head.

Convinced by now that the mysterious automatic writing was a symptom of something badly amiss, I said as soothingly as I could, "Why not go upstairs and lie down, try to sleep that headache off, while I call up somebody at Student Health and then maybe one of your parents. This is nothing to fool around with, Terry, believe me. You need to get some help."

At the word "parents" Terry set the teacup he had just picked up down with a clunk that sloshed tea into the saucer. "No!" He shook his poor head very hard. "I mean, thanks a lot, really, but I don't want my parents mixing into my problems. What I want—what I'm *going* to do, in fact, is drive back out there and see if I can figure out what might have happened on Sunday."

He stood up. So did I, saying quickly, "That strikes me as a truly terrible idea! You're anxious and upset and feeling awful; you shouldn't

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be driving at all, let alone returning to the scene of whatever upset you so much in the first place!" When this speech had not prevented Terry from putting on his coat I decided it was time to do the Professorial Heavy. "Terry, I can't possibly allow this. You're staying right here while I call Student Health, and then we'll see what's what." This technique worked better for my husband, a large, distinguished-looking man with a mustache and graying temples, than it did for me; I wished desperately that Matt weren't gone for the day. I could cow many kids, but not always the more frantic male sort of which Terry was at that moment a prime example.

"Call whoever you want, but I'm not staying. I don't mean to be rude, I know you're trying to help and I know people have probably trampled the place all up by now, but I still have to go see if there's anything *to* see—before I get mixed up with doctors and all that and maybe *can't* go anywhere."

But he was a well-brought-up boy, and disliked defying the authority figure who had exerted herself to befriend him, so when I said sternly as he was walking toward the door, "Terry, it's no use arguing, I *can't* let you drive a car in the condition you're in," he hesitated. And when I said then: "Okay, you win. You can go check out the scene to see whether it tells you anything. But I'll drive you there, and come along with you, and afterwards I'll bring you back here; and *then* we'll make arrangements with Student Health, and my husband or I will drive you into town and bring your roommate back out to collect his car himself. All right?" he only said weakly, "It's a lot of bother for you."

"Less bother than scraping you up off the pavement. Come on, let's put what's left of this pot into a thermos, and pick up something to eat on the way. We'll do exactly what you did on Sunday, there's just enough light left not to have to hurry. Let me just damp the stove down, here, like so . . . and away we go." Chattering thus, trying not to sound as relieved as I felt, I steered him through the door, got him to move the monstrous car (half afraid he'd try to make a break) while scribbling a note for Matt and cramming a few things into a daypack, then backed the Toyota smartly into the road. This trip could be done in under two hours; by then Matt would be home, and between us we could easily intimidate Terry into doing what *we* thought best.

It was not very nice weather for what, under different circumstances, could have been a pleasant outing, yet I wasn't sorry even so to get out of the house. We left the car where Terry had left his roommate's, I zipped our bag of Dunkin Donuts (collected en route) into my red nylon daypack and shrugged it on, and together we walked briskly along a paved road that had been closed to motorized traffic. After weeks of thick cloud but little rain the creek was low. Most of the red-brown beech and

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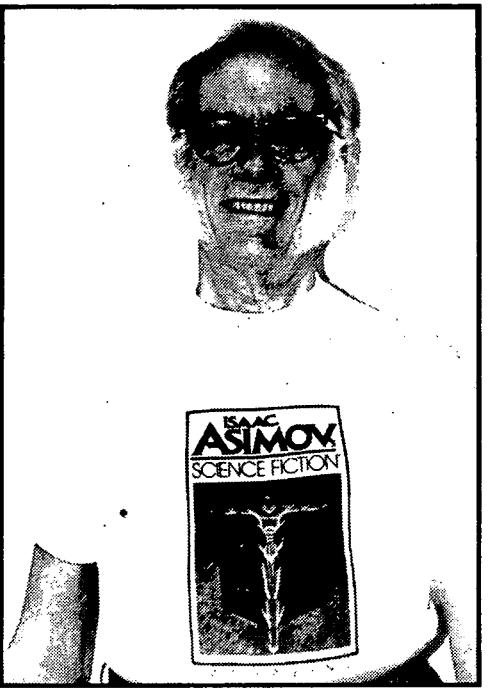

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yellow tulip poplar leaves had come down but lay still crisp and vivid on the ground. Terry too seemed affected by the fresh air. The quick pace brought color back into his face, the Bufferins evidently began to do their stuff, and soon he had started to look about him and to take an interest. "If we're replaying Sunday, along about here's where I dipped into the muffin bag," he said, and I slid the pack off one shoulder and doled him out a doughnut.

Joggers and cyclists passed us in both directions, whizzing or bent double to defeat the hill. One smallish runner, garbed outlandishly in knicker-style sweat pants, wore a black balaclava mask over his face, with holes for his mouth and nose. Various articles of what appeared to be extra clothing fluttered about his waist. He glared blankly at us as he passed, arms whirling, pale bare calves twinkling. Terry grinned delightedly after him and said "Talk about your alien invaders!" in a tone so cheerful that I began to congratulate myself that this excursion was the best possible antidote for the trouble he was in, even that there was probably a perfectly reasonable explanation for it. Reasonable explanations were my stock in trade.

Then we were at the place where the White Trail intersected the road. Terry turned into it eagerly, leading the way left and steeply uphill, following blazes of white paint stenciled on trees and rocks toward where three or four huge granite outcrops lay where a glacier had left or exposed them in a time too remote to imagine. Climbing the hill, we startled a group of five does whose puffy white tails flicked and wagged nervously out of sight among the bare trees. A steep quarter of a mile or so above the road, "This one," Terry said, and scrambled up onto an immense rock to the right of the footpath, which twisted round that massive blockiness and ran on.

The top of the rock was shaped like a natural bench. I pulled from my pack its entire contents: thermos, doughnuts, styrofoam cups, spoons, and two foam pads of polyurethane, one of which I gave Terry to sit on. "Watch where you put your hands. I happen to know that in summer it's solid poison ivy up here," I said; and then, the elements of our mad tea party arranged between us, I poured him out a cup and passed it over.

"You know something, this is kind of fun. My Dad always packed along a sack lunch when he brought me up here—sandwiches, apples, and two cans of Coke in a quilted thing for keeping a bottle of wine cold."

"Ever read Proust? No, I don't expect you would have yet. In *Remembrance of Things Past* Proust tells how a bit of cake in a spoonful of tea brought all the repressed memories of his childhood flooding back to him." I opened up the silly-looking bag, white with large pink and brown polka dots printed on, and held it out to him. "All *you* have to remember, my lad, is Sunday."

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Terry tore a glazed doughnut in two, dunked one half in his cup, and grinned. "Here goes, then!" He bit off the soggy end, chewed tentatively, made a comical face. "Coffee's a lot better as a dunking agent, I remember *that* much about Sunday. How fast is it supposed to work? The rest of the morning is still a blank." But he looked around more thoughtfully, eating, finishing his tea. I refilled his cup but kept quiet, letting him try. The exam was folded into the outer zippered pocket of the pack, to be produced if that seemed like a good idea. What would be the effect of reading it aloud up here, I wondered, unsure of the relative merits of pushing the situation or letting it pass completely into professional hands; and while I was dithering Terry suddenly said in an odd voice, "A deer did that."

"Did what?" He pointed into the trees behind us, where a roughly circular patch of churned-up earth showed clearly against the russet clutter of fallen leaves. "Mm-hm. It's a scrape. The bucks start making them a few weeks before the onset of the real rut—along about right now, in fact. Most of the does won't be in season for another week or two but the bucks are ready *now*, so they burn off steam digging up the ground and hooking at the low branches while they do it—see where those twigs are broken off and the bark's scraped off the branches?"

"Yeah," said Terry, "only how come *I* know a deer did it?" He put half a doughnut down on the bare rock and hugged his middle hard with his forearms. "Oh-oh, here we go again. All of a sudden I don't feel so great." A moment later his teeth were actually chattering. My view of the wisdom of his coming back up here with only me to help him underwent instant revision.

"Your father told you, I'll bet—when you were little," I suggested, trying not to sound as alarmed as I felt.

"No. No! Not when I was little and not my father—*Sunday*. I saw it! I saw him, he was charging round and round, pawing up the ground with his front feet and arching his neck, battering at the branches with his antlers, whuffing and whirling around like crazy. I *saw* him, I was sitting right here but he never noticed, he was completely involved in what he was doing. God, it was fantastic—and—*they* were as knocked out as I was—" he broke off and, as at the house, went greenish-white, his breath coming in the same shallow gasps.

" 'They' who? Who else was up here that morning?"

"The . . . there were . . . two of them. A guy . . . there, up the hill, in a, like, a beekeeper suit. And the other one—was—" Terry screamed, sharply and so abruptly that I knocked the thermos fifteen feet to the ground, while he sprawled flat and was sick again over the far edge of the outcrop. For at least a minute he hung there head down, retching

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and gasping. My own heart pounded madly; I felt more than a little queasy myself and had no idea what to do.

But when he sat up again, finally, and reached for a paper Dunkin Donuts napkin to wipe his mouth, I could see that it was all right.

"Sorry," he said, "sorry to keep doing that to you—but that's really the last time." He put the wadded napkin in his coat pocket. "See, I wasn't *supposed* to remember, that's why I'd keep throwing up every time I started to. But *that* time I think it all came back at once." There was some cold tea left in his cup; he used it to rinse his mouth and spat over the edge of the rock.

"None of this," I said unsteadily, "Makes any sense to *me*. All of *what* came back—or should you save it to tell to somebody who would know how to listen better than I do? I'd have said it all came *up* at once. Again."

Terry grinned, still pale, his face still damp. "It's okay, I don't need a shrink," he said, and at that moment he really didn't look as if he did, though twice in as many hours I had seen him switch back and forth, back and forth between apparent normality and acute illness. "I'll tell you, only you won't believe me. Nobody will . . . can I have the last doughnut, by the way?"

"Only if you *swear* to keep it *down*. How you can go on trying in the face of such discouragement is beyond me."

"You're seeing the last of this one, I guarantee it. Okay: here's what happened. I came up here just like I said, and sat right here thinking Robert Penn Warren, Robert Penn Warren, and looking around at the same time, sort of abstractedly, you know? And I suddenly noticed that right over there, right up the hill next to the trail, there was a place where it was summer."

"Summer?" He nodded. "I don't follow."

"And a different time of day, too: later, maybe early afternoon. I was, like, looking through a round window with no wall around it. Blurry at the edges, but the same hillside in the center—only it was a very bright, blue, sunny day inside the circle and everything was *green*—leaves on the trees, green stuff growing on the ground, weeds and stickerbushes and things, all green. When I first saw it, for just a second it was a green blur sort of bouncing around, but then right away it stopped bouncing and came into clear focus as I was watching, and I got the impression of looking through a giant lens of some sort, like the lens of a camera." He had been staring up the hill as he spoke, but here he glanced back at me and smiled, pleased with himself. "I was right, as it turned out."

"A giant *lens?*" Hadn't he mentioned a lens in his exam? But way up in the middle of the air? "Ah—how big would you say it was?"

"About . . . oh, say the size of a slide projector screen." Terry grimaced and shook himself. "It was overcast that morning too or maybe it wouldn't

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have been so impossible not to notice. First I was dumbfounded, then I was scared shitless. Then I started telling myself to get down off this rock and see what would happen if I tried to walk *through* the summer • part, but before I'd quite got up the nerve to try *that*, two people—well, figures—came into the green area and sort of peered through from their side into mine. That's when I was sure it wasn't just a trick of the light or whatever. I mean, the shape of the hill was the same, there were trees in both parts, it *could* have been my coffee nerves plus no sleep plus one beam of sunlight breaking through—something like that. But these . . . figures were only partly visible. I could see most of the bigger one, but in the way you see somebody who's walking around outside a house you're *inside* of, looking out. When they get too close to the house you can only see part of them, right? The window frame cuts off the rest? Well, I could see this guy's head and shoulders down to his waist or so, but nothing below. It was," said Terry simply, "just like raising a window blind and looking out into a summer day."

"You weren't—forgive my asking again, will you?—you weren't tripping that morning, either?"

"I swear I wasn't," said Terry, not angrily. "I'd been trying to write that paper."

I chose to reserve judgment. "So what about the other person, the smaller figure?"

"That was the alien," he said, and a tense little silence fell between us.

Terry broke it (which is more than I felt able to do; right on schedule, here came the alien invaders): "Hey, it might be better if I just tell what happened."

"Go ahead, I won't interrupt again."

"Well, the tall guy, the human, he saw me right away and sort of, like, froze in horror, and said 'Oh, Christ, there's somebody *over* there' to the alien. And the alien says 'I see him' and then something like 'Well, we knew it was a calculated risk, but what a pity.' He—the alien—he was wearing protective clothing too. He was shorter though, and sort of more compactly built, and his face, what I could see of it under the beekeeper helmet, looked hairy. Like he had a Santa Claus beard—light-colored, white or maybe gray. Anyway, I'm still perched up here scared out of my wits, but when I hear them talking ordinary American English I manage to say, 'Hey, what's going on,' or something equally witty."

"Did the alien have an accent?" I could not stop myself from asking.

"Nope. He talked just like we do. So the other guy—he wasn't very old, by the way—he says 'I'll explain in a minute,' and then he says 'Listen, is it Halloween over there?' 'Not for a few days yet,' I say, naturally thinking there are only two kinds of people that ever say that

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kind of thing, amnesia victims and time travelers. I'm thinking, no matter what I do or say now, it'll be like out of some B-grade movie—great. But I have to know, so I go 'I guess that means you guys are supposed to be from the future,' and the human says 'You got it,' just like that. Then he says 'Only we're still *in* the future. We can see you but we're not coming through, we can't, and you can't either. What time of day have you got? It's too dark to tell from here.' So I tell him, very early morning. Playing along, but not really believing it yet, you know? But still scared as hell because I couldn't figure out how they were doing it, or what was really going on."

But as Terry spoke, I began to believe *I* knew what had "really" been going on; a picture was taking shape, of a tall human and small alien looking back together into a past they could not (re)enter. All this, I thought privately, would be grist for the shrinks to sift; I'd better listen carefully.

"So," Terry went on, "I said, feeling like an idiot, 'Hey, I thought you weren't supposed to risk changing the past.' 'We're not,' the guy says, 'My friend will have to mindwipe you. I'm really sorry. I'm not even supposed to be doing this, and we hit the wrong day anyway.' He seemed real disappointed about that. So I say, 'Not supposed to be doing what?' and he says, 'I'm a'—I think it was like technician or engineer—'in the Bureau of Temporal Physics and I talked my friend here, who's also my boss and a supervisor in the Bureau, into taking out a time terminal so I could try to make a birthday present for this terrific old cousin of mine who's turning seventy in a couple of weeks. I had this great idea for a *present!*' See, he wanted to film something that happened to this cousin right here in this park a long time ago, that he always used to hear about when he was a kid. He was hoping not only to see it himself but to film it, for a surprise."

"That's as wild as some of the excuses I get for why my students' papers don't come in on time."

Terry grinned. "You never know, the craziest-sounding ones might be the truest! But at the time of course I'm thinking, sure, sure, tell me another one. But he just went on explaining how the terminal had to be brought physically to the site of the event they wanted to 'see,' and that he knew it was a long shot because they can only tune it to within a few days, it isn't accurate to the day, let alone the hour and minute they want. So he knew they might hit a few days early or late, but he still seemed really disappointed, because this was his only crack at it, the terminal's expensive to run, it uses a lot of energy even to see thirty years back—that's how far back they were looking.

"Anyway, his cousin always used to bring him to the park to watch the deer through binoculars, and show him this rock, and tell him that

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one Halloween day just as it was getting dark this cousin was sitting right here where we are, where I was then, and all at once a buck ran out of the woods and mated with a doe right beside the rock, only a few feet away. He wanted to film *that*—the actual mating! Without the cousin seeing him, of course—no wonder he had a heart attack when he saw *me* sitting up here, he didn't want *her* mindwiped! He was a nice guy." Terry said. "I really liked him a lot, all the time I thought he was trying to snow me."

To my mind, elements in the story were continuing to fit a pattern; even the double meaning of the word *present* fit. Mostly for the sake of saying something I remarked that the device seemed unworkably awkward; suppose they switched on the lens in the middle of a church picnic? Would they mindwipe everybody? Did they *have* to bring the lens to the precise site of the event they wanted to observe? In that case I didn't see how they could control the thing enough to use it, particularly in the absence of fine tuning.

Terry frowned. "I know. It does seem . . . but they must be able to operate it better, normally. This was a sort of rough-and-ready occasion. But Tim did say that the reason—"

"The young man's name was Tim?"

"That's what the alien called him, yeah. He said they had to bring the time window to the actual place, on the principle of haunted houses—that place and time are connected. You know, like when a ghost in an eighteenth-century getup appears in the library of an old mansion, or people who have met a violent end keep wandering around re-experiencing the death in the place where it happened. That kind of thing. We," he said cheerfully, "aren't going to find that out for a while longer—not till the aliens tell us, when they get here. The time transceiver is *their* gizmo. We didn't figure out that much about time before they came. *Won't* have figured it out before they *come*, I should say."

"Which will be when?"

"Pretty soon now, I guess. Before we blow ourselves up at least. Less than thirty years for sure, cause that's how far ahead of us they were. Are." He laughed. "It's hard to talk about! But they won't get here before—see, this was the point of the present—they won't get here before there's a major accident at a power plant someplace around here and the whole region gets contaminated with radioactive crap released into the atmosphere. It'll be as bad as Chernobyl, at least as bad. Most of the people will get out, but the wildlife and vegetation, and the soil—well, I noticed the trees after he told me that, the summer trees. They were mostly green, but the young ones looked all warped and distorted and quite a few were dead. And all the animals in the park, of course, all the deer. They're all going to die."

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My heart squeezed shut at this for an instant, so plausibly did Terry relate this part of his tale. But I held firmly to my sense of the pattern. Naturally, within the mythic park of Terry' childhood, all the beautiful, innocent deer of the past must die because of the meltdown divorce.

I asked if "Tim" had told him which plant would go out, and was not surprised when he frowned again and said "I don't think so."

"If you were so scared," I suddenly thought to wonder, "why didn't you just take off? Get out of there?"

Terry made a quizzical face. "It never occurred to me, so I guess I must have been more intrigued and fascinated than scared, right from the start. Or maybe the Hefn made me want to stay, without my knowing it. He probably could have."

"The Hefn is the alien?"

"Unh-hnh. Tim said they'd left some of their people here a long while back, and were going to pick 'em up again in a year or so, but had trouble with their ship. And when they finally did get back, their people were all dead and ours had reached the post-industrial stage and the brink of space exploration. So they sized us up, and some of them wanted to stick around and help us get through it—because they could tell we were heading straight to hell in a handbasket—but the ones in charge just wanted to get out. So they all took off again, but before they got very far there was a mutiny or something on board, and they turned the ship around and came back. And just before they arrived for the second time the power plant went, so when they landed they just took over."

He glanced at me, expecting a reaction. I could think of nothing to say. This *deus ex machina* solution seemed the *least* original element of Terry's tale, and I thought "Hefn" a preposterous name, probably derived from "Heffalump"—or maybe "Heaven." I was beginning to feel exhausted.

"Well anyway," he finally went on, "they rigged a kind of blind for the time terminal, so the deer couldn't see them and be spooked. Then the alien got me to scrunch down back here, on the saddle between the main parts of this rock, and put me under somehow—hypnotized me—so I just crouched down there without moving for, oh, a couple of hours. Which is how come I know for sure that they really were what Tim said they were. And I saw the buck come and make the scrape, that was the high point for them, they were *thrilled*, you should've heard them—the Hefn too. They filmed that. It was the next best thing to getting what they came for. Then they got ready to shut the lens down and turn off the terminal, but first they had to mindwipe me."

I roused myself to say, "Tim seems to have done a lot of explaining in not very much time. When did he give you all that information—while you were hypnotized?"

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"No, before that, while they were setting up the blind. I got the impression the Hefn didn't really approve, but he didn't interfere either. I don't think Tim had ever talked to anybody in the past before. After he got over being put out he seemed—kind of excited, like he might be talking too much—because really, what was the point? If they were going to make me forget it all afterwards anyway? I tried my damnedest to talk 'em out of *that*—I said, what did they think gave them the right to hypnotize people for a couple of hours without their consent and then erase their memories, all for the sake of a *birthday* present? What about my civil rights?"

"What did he say to that?"

"He said the aliens weren't real big on civil rights. He said, for them a lot of times the end justifies the means, and they were in charge of things right now, and anyway if I knew his cousin I'd understand why *this* Hefn had let him try to make the film, even if it meant a risk for somebody like me, who happened to be around at the wrong time. He apologized about twenty times, I could see he felt bad about it. He really was a nice guy."

I sat silent, truly sorry and sad for Terry whose entire bizarre story of deer and cousin, birthday present and forgetfulness and guilt, seemed detail by detail a transparent, if colorfully transformed, allegory of his own situation.

"I'm sure the mindwipe would have worked," he added, "if I hadn't taken that exam the very next day. All those *deer!* You know? Because in a real sense, what happened—what's going to happen—is just that Stafford poem on a broader scale. Dead does and fawns that will never be born, because of human carelessness. Technology destroying the natural world by accident. It's all the same thing, the same idea. But even then, if you'd happened to lose all those exams in a taxi or something, or had just given me an F on mine, I'd never have remembered all this again." He sighed and smiled, a smile of perfect guilelessness, perfect relief. "I'm *glad* I remembered. Nobody'll ever believe it, I know that—*you* think I got all worked up about my Dad and the divorce and hallucinated the whole thing, don't you?"—I started at this perceptiveness, making Terry laugh—"and of course I see why anybody might think that, at least until the Hefn get here! But I swear to God, the whole thing happened exactly like I said."

There seemed to be no way to answer this. I covered the awkwardness of my exposed hypothesis (which was all *my* awkwardness; Terry went on smiling gratefully at me) by starting to pack up the trash and situpons. It was past time to leave; already it would be dark before we got back to the car.

"Anyway," he said kindly, almost teasingly, moving to help, "some

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parts of the plot don't really fit, do they? That old cousin with the birthday, for example; shouldn't it have been a *male* relative, like an uncle or something? If, you know, if it was just a stand-in for my father. And then why would it be the little alien who mindwipes me, if he's really just a projection *of* me? And what about the *beard?* Mine wouldn't be gray for about forty more years, even if I grew one! Besides, wouldn't you think the guy—"

But I was no longer really listening—had stiffened, the foam pads half-rolled, my face gone numb about them. "Terry," I broke in, "this cousin was a *woman?*"

"Yeah. Didn't I say so?"

"If you did it went right by me." Then Terry's own face went slack as the freakish possibility struck him too, and we stared at one another with the same wild surmise. "I thought *today* was Halloween," I said, and at the same instant Terry said "When's *your* birthday, anyway?"

But before either of us could reply to the other the crashing in the dead leaves began, the doe—foreordained, remembered—came hurtling up the slope toward the rocky outcrops at a dead gallop, an indistinct dun-colored shape in the dusk, hotly pursued by the second, larger, nobler shape which overtook, licked and nuzzled and finally lunged above her directly beneath the great boulder where we crouched, knocking her forward onto her knees with the force of the single thrust delivered so explosively that his hind feet left the ground—and off, down and away so swiftly we had scarcely moved or breathed till there were no deer anywhere on the twilit slope below. ●

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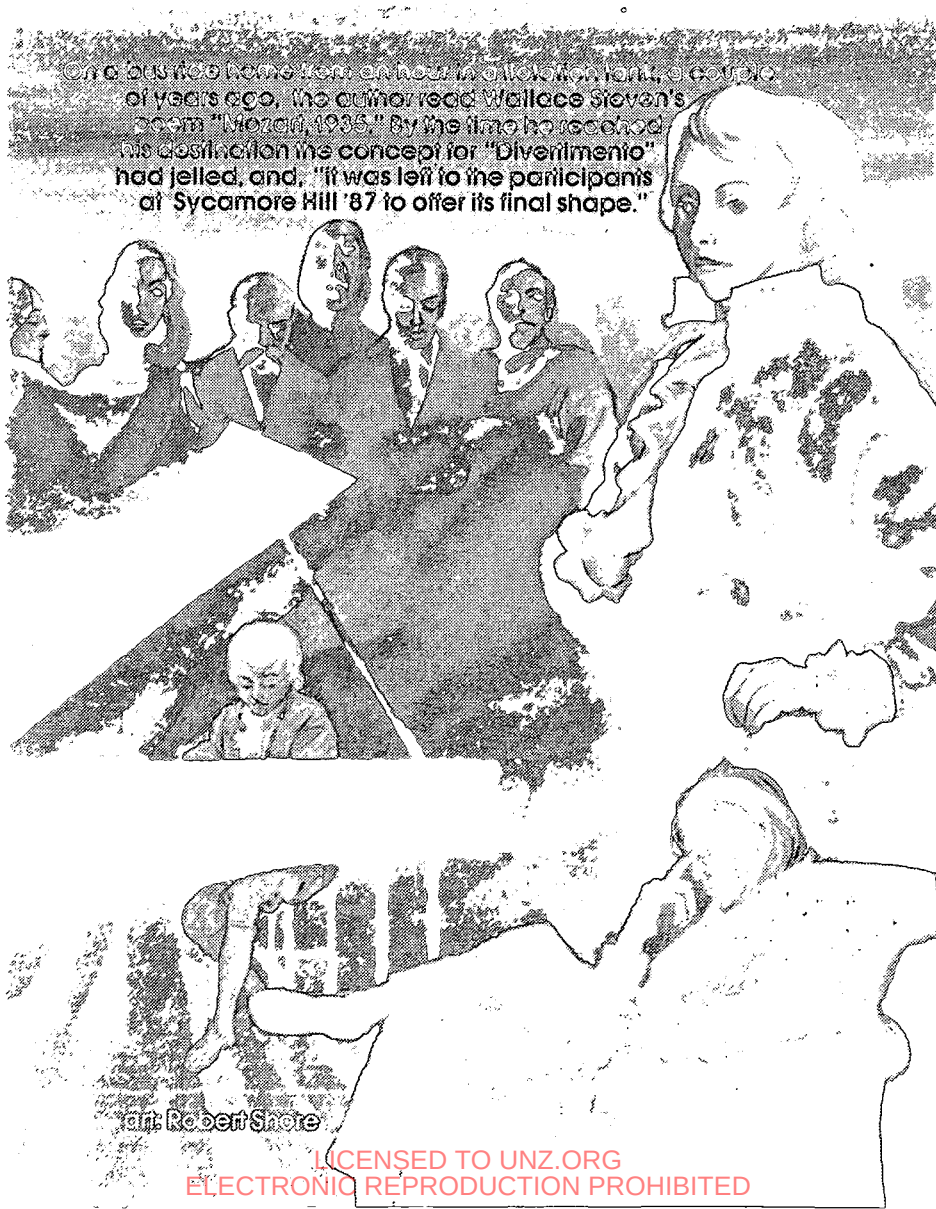
DIVERTIMENTO

by Gregory Frost



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In the center of a ring of thirty or more tourists, a polished clavichord stood, solitary. Although heavy drapes were drawn across the windows all around the room, dazzlingly bright highlights reflected off the clavichord's surfaces. The tourists cleared their throats, muttered expectantly to one another, and shifted from foot to foot while they waited. They had been told not to sit just yet. Most had little idea of what exactly they were about to see.

Their host—a stocky man with a heavy black beard just starting to gray, and wearing eighteenth century dress—entered the room. His name was Peter Tellier. He nodded to them, and took his place in one of two large chairs of walnut and upholstery set up directly behind the performer's bench. At his signal, the tourists sat, too. The Beidermeier armchair beside him remained empty.

A few moments later, directly in front of Peter Tellier, a boy appeared out of thin air and walked toward the keyboard. He seated himself imperiously upon the bench. Like Peter, he wore period clothing. His red coattails dangled lazily over the small bench. He crossed his ankles. Then, with eyes glistening, the boy, Mozart, glanced over his shoulder, directly at Peter.

After the first few times he had seen these actions repeated, Peter Tellier had dragged a chair to the spot, so that their eyes—his and Mozart's—would meet when the young composer looked around. He had hoped they would see each other, and maybe make friends. He would so have liked a playmate but had long since stopped pretending that such a thing could happen. That secret glance did communicate something wonderful, but not to him. Who was this look of pride meant for? Sister? Father? The doddering Archbishop? Peter had come to believe, having looked things up in a decrepit music encyclopedia, that it was Michael Haydn being promised something wonderful. Haydn would have had good cause to hope.

Such heavy eyelids, thought Peter. The eyes seemed too large for Mozart's small face. His little powdered wig curled into a ridge running around the back of his head from ear to ear. Peter thought of him as a little sheep. "Safely grazing," he mumbled, then glanced around self-consciously, but no one had noticed. His sister wasn't going to make this performance; probably she didn't even know what time it was. The other mismatched chairs, gathered from abandoned buildings nearby, were arranged in a half-circle that kept everyone at a distance from Peter and Susanne. "Lamb of God," he said, almost in prayer, "sacrificed upon the altar of Salzburg." It was a line from the crumbling encyclopedia that had stuck in his mind; it might as easily have described him as Mozart.

Mozart began playing. The sound of the clavichord was incredibly piercing. Tellier beamed at the beauty of it. He wished he knew how to

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play. His parents had lacked the money for lessons, and he had never really thought about it back then. Now, for all his wishing, the matter had been irreversibly resolved.

The piece Mozart played was a practice, a test, though not for him—he had written it and knew it so well that he needed no scrap of music before him. It was a trial run for a female singer. The opening was meant to be sung by a choir, but none existed in this performance. Instead, playing off each other's voices, the singer and Mozart would carry the opening together in a duet. Peter had hired a choral group once to see if he could draw a bigger crowd, but the cluster of singers took up too much space and blocked much of the view of the phenomenon, and he lost money. The crowds had thinned even further. He had come to believe since that the eeriness of the unaccompanied performance was what made it so riveting.

The long introduction, one day to be carried out by a small orchestra, neared its end. Tellier knew it by heart now: *Regina Coeli,* Kochel 127. He sat more stiffly. His hands were sweating. Mozart turned his eager young face to the side, addressing the woman no one else could see.

She began. She sounded as if she were standing just to the right of the clavichord. Her pure voice echoed like the ringing of a distant bell. Peter was pretty sure the voice belonged to Maria Lipp, wife to Michael Haydn. Haydn, so he believed, was sitting or standing right about where the two chairs were. Peter wished Maria Lipp would manifest there with Mozart, but he doubted that would ever happen. All the resurrections he'd heard of had arrived in single lumps, as finished or unfinished as they could ever be. He wished they would stop arriving altogether: Crowds this size were becoming the exception.

She sang out with Mozart: "Regina coeli laetare." They repeated it—all of it, parts of it—weaving around each other until the line ended, as did all the lines of the piece, in an "alleluja" meant for the complete chorus.

"Queen of heaven, rejoice," said Peter, sharing what he could. The crowd had fliers, in seven languages, translating the text; they didn't need his help but he couldn't keep it to himself. After so many performances, he had to show off just a little. He lowered his head, pretending to lose himself in the music.

The performance went on for a little over ten minutes, after which, unaware of the audience's applause, an excited Mozart got up and dashed right at Peter. An instant before he reached the big chair, he vanished. The crowd gasped as one—Mozart had become real to them. Peter thought sometimes that he could feel Mozart passing through him on his journey back in time, but he knew he was making that all up.

The applause thinned out quickly: With the performer nonexistent,

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who was there to clap for? Peter, after all, had done nothing more than tell them when to sit.

The crowd rose to leave, mumbling, grabbing their coats, thanking Peter as he held open the door for them, some enthusiastically, but most with an air of doubt, as if suspecting the whole thing to have been a hoax. Did any of them, he wondered, even know the story of this house?

When the last of them was gone, Peter stood briefly at the door, looking down the narrow slush-covered street toward the snowy heights of Kapuzinerberg for a sign of Susanne; but she was nowhere to be seen. She'd be out there somewhere, not very far away. Her playtime wanderings always worried him. If something should happen while she was out there, he might never know about it. He searched for her footprints but the tourists had stamped out all traces. His breath steamed. The cold stung his face. He closed the door and headed back inside. On the way down the hall, he dimmed the lights, then drifted back to his chair. Such weariness overcame him that he thought, with a spark of fear, he might be wearing out.

In the empty circle another performance would soon begin, but no more audiences were scheduled for today. He'd had them all week, five times a day, and that was enough. Too much. But the take had been exceptional. Enough to buy more medical help for Susanne. He looked at the dark space where the clavichord would shortly reappear.

He sat awhile in the dark, his thoughts going nowhere in particular. The smell coming from the kitchen was of warm chocolate. Behind him, the door banged open and his sister shuffled in. Filthy snow slid from her black boots; snow spackled her thermal-weave pantlegs. Peter tried not to show his great relief, because it would have revealed his concern at her absence. He thought she might have grown tired of the music. But of course that was absurd—Susanne had no idea how long she had been gone. One performance was any performance to her.

She had been making chocolate lace by pouring hot caramel into snowbanks. Undoubtedly she had wandered off with her pan of caramel to find just the right pile of snow. She had forgotten the pan outside somewhere in order to carry the product in—a pile of fragile amber sheets, crisscrossed patterns lying like pages of an open hymnal on her mittened palms. The whole world for Susanne at present consisted of getting the hardened caramel to the kitchen, where melted chocolate waited to receive each layer, thereby creating the time-honored confectionary wonder.

Susanne was younger than Peter by a year and a half, but she could easily have been his mother, even his grandmother. The device that had torn Mozart out of antiquity had detonated much nearer Susanne than

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her brother. The particles that had passed through her had slowed and lost energy by the time they reached Peter. As a result, her genetic material had received much higher exposure. She would have been dead, a memory, except that their parents—the first ones struck—had inadvertently shielded her somewhat with their bodies. Both parents turned from tissue to dust almost instantly. Cheeks caved in, eyes crackled back into the wrinkling lids, bodies doubled over, folding like accordions to the ground, where they puffed up a cloud of brown smoke. All of this in a second or two while their children writhed in a torment of stretching bones, growing teeth, sprouting hair—human ecosystems wildly out of control. Peter could still hear his parents' cries go creaking into oblivion and remember how he thought his fingertips would pop open to let his skeleton expand.

He understood little about the "time bombs," as the press had dubbed them. The bombs had exploded in a few places around the world, but mostly here in Salzburg. No one knew why, just as no one knew for certain their source. Experts from Boston to Beijing speculated that the creators of the bombs, themselves from the future, had no idea of the destructive capacity of these devices. They might, in fact, be early experiments in time travel, the first unmanned capsules, inadvertently creating catastrophe by hauling a bit of future matter into the present. There was talk of prototachyonic pulses, of bombardment and loops, of matter and antimatter, of fission. None of it meant much to Peter. What no one talked about was the horrible pain of being eleven years old and watching your parents molder in front of your eyes. No one had ever consoled him over that. They were afraid of him and Susanne—absurdly afraid that what had happened might be contagious.

Though his hair and beard showed patches of gray and his eyes were dry and pouchy, Peter Tellier had only recently turned fifteen. Susanne, with her trembling arthritic hands, was thirteen but as a result of the time bomb had jumped all of adulthood to an immediate, doddering second childhood of perhaps eighty, perhaps more. Her deterioration seemed daily more evident to her helpless brother. Her body was racing to its end. Mozart—the sole means of support for the two children—was both the eldest and the youngest in the room at sixteen.

While her brother looked on, Susanne hobbled out of the kitchen. Chocolate stained her mouth and fingers. Tucked up under her arm like a football, she carried a feather duster.

The clavichord sat glowing in the center of the room, having reappeared for another performance, and Susanne intended to clean it. Peter sighed, inwardly aching on her behalf. She had been to so many specialists but no one had helped her. They probed her, studied her, probably wore her

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out faster with their poking and prodding than if he'd just let her deteriorate in peace, but he still sought for some cure. He recalled the way they had looked at him the last time, unable to cope with the idea of a little boy who was in appearance their senior. They often spoke to him about his sister as they might have spoken to his father, and for brief periods he became his father, acted the way his father might have done.

A scary kind of fame surrounded the time bombs; less respectable journals wrote outrageous things regarding them. The attention brought the crowds, certainly. They had to pay a lot to get in here, and they paid it without a whimper, because nowhere else would they ever see the real live Mozart . . . unless, of course, another bomb released another segment of the composer's life. Peter refused anyone the chance to record the event, although a few had offered him substantial money to do so. What he couldn't understand was why some world network hadn't come forward with millions for exclusive rights. It was what he'd dreamt of, but no one had fulfilled that dream. There were other places he might have taken Susanne, with that kind of money.

As she neared the keyboard, Susanne disrupted the image. Static sparks danced on the feather duster, traveled up her arm. The clavichord rippled. Heedless, Susanne went right on dusting. Peter could read pain in every tiny movement that she made. She was, he conceded, getting much worse.

Peter suddenly found that he couldn't stand it any longer. "It's time," he called to her to let her know that Mozart would be coming out in a moment.

She turned around, shifting her weight from one hip to the other, wincing but denying it, too. She smiled at him. Half her teeth had dissolved. "What will he play for us today?"

"I don't know. Why don't you come and sit, and find out."

"He likes my cleaning up. He always gives me such a look before he starts, just to tell me that he's pleased."

"Yes, he does, doesn't he?" They'd had almost this same conversation a hundred times. Each repetition weighed him down more; he'd end up stoop-shouldered the way his father had always said he would if he didn't stand up straight.

He got up and helped his sister to her chair. He took an afghan from the back of the chair, unfolded it and laid it across her lap. She leaned around him to watch Mozart emerge on his way to the clavichord. "Look, he's going to nod to me, Petey," she said. Peter looked down at her eyes full of delight and his face grew hot. He dodged around his own chair and walked off quickly, hoping to escape before the playing started.

At the door he snatched his coat from a peg, hastily wrestled his way into it on the way out the door.

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The cold sliced under his skin. Outside, the orange haze of the sky framed baroque shadows and bombed-out buildings. In the further depths behind him, the keys of the clavichord "spanged" under Mozart's fingers, the introduction moving into the first verse of the *Regina Coeli.* How lonely the tiny voice sounded. It seemed to echo through the austere environment. Where had all the tourists gone? To the hotels, no doubt, on the other side of Kapuzinerburg, the living side. No bombs had gone off there as of the last Peter had heard. Smoke and lights sparkled in the early twilight over across the river. Hardly any showed down the street here. Or maybe the tourists had gone to the Cathedral Square. He had read about a time bomb there, that killed twenty and brought to life a piece of the "Everyman" play that long ago had been performed there every year. No doubt he'd lost paying customers to that event. To him that was the real cruelty of the bombs—that they wrought their damage without purpose or plan, robbing a life and then robbing the chance to rebuild that life.

The spirit woman sang, "Quia quem meruisti portare . . . "

Peter walked away from the sound. The snow crunched beneath his feet. He pretended to be his father, engaged in conversation with him. "You are fifteen now," the father said, "too old to play make-believe games anymore. You and your sister can hardly get along now. Where will you go when the money is gone? When the tourists stop coming altogether? You haven't saved enough, Peter. You're living like sick people. You have your food delivered, and you never leave the house except to take your sister out sometimes. You've grown up afraid. Afraid of the world."

"I have Mozart," Peter replied, a little scared by what he was revealing from within. "Maybe we could go with him."

"Does your Mozart know that he's here? Does he know that you're here? Or Susie? No. You're playing games, Peter. Mozart's dead, and you and your sister are catching up with him."

"Stop it," Peter said. He stopped walking. The "voice" went away. It hadn't been his father at all. He turned and saw how far from the house he had gone in just a few minutes. He had nearly reached the other end of the street and the arrow sign he had put up. From there, the house looked no different from any of the other uninhabited dwellings surrounding it. Hurriedly, he walked back toward it. Look at the place. Without the sign how could the tourists know in which house Mozart played? No wonder the crowds had thinned out. He'd been so busy with Susanne's care that he had let the house rot around him.

As he neared, he could hear Maria Lipp singing repeatedly, "Resurrexit," then both she and Mozart launched into a series of joyous "allelujahs."

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Peter closed the door, then stood leaning against it, as if to keep something evil out. His breathing wheezed and little sparkles danced in the air. He couldn't believe such a short run had drained him so much.

The beautiful voice floated through "Ora pro nobis Deum." Peter thought, *please, yes, pray for us to God.*

He hung on there until the last "allelujah" was sung. Susanne began clapping gaily. Peter peered through the doorway at her, as Mozart came running only to vanish just before reaching her.

Seeming to sense his presence, Susanne glanced back at him. "Hello, Petey," she said. "Would you like some of my chocolate lace? It ought to be hard now."

He nodded. His face had gone dull with dissembling to hide from all the fears that churned inside him. He watched her climb up to shuffle across to the kitchen, obviously in great pain. The feather duster fell from her lap but she made no attempt to pick it up. She looked more withered than when she had sat down, only minutes before. When she was out of sight, he took off his coat and hung it back in the hallway.

"We can share it with Mozart, okay?" she called out to him.

"Fine." The word squeaked out of his knotted throat.

Susanne came shambling out of the kitchen, nearly doubled over with the effort of supporting her treat. It lay, a dark doily across her hands. Delight glistened in her cataracted eyes, senility blocking pain. "Lookit, isn't it nice?"

Peter stared at her and saw no one that he recognized. The sister he knew had gone into the kitchen; this creature had emerged, cut loose finally from his memories of her. What had happened to his sister? "Susie," he lamented. He walked swiftly forward, reaching out to take the chocolate.

Susanne's brows knitted. She glanced down at her breastbone. "Bee bite," she said. Uncomprehending, Peter drew up for a moment. Then Susanne swayed and her head went back with a look like that of ecstasy on her face.

Peter cried out and rushed forward. The chocolate lace slid off her hand and dropped. The fragile, woven strands shattered as they hit the floor, scattering fragments in every direction. Peter clutched her to him, his feet crunching on the glassy bits of caramel. "No, Susanne."

"Petey, I'm funny," she said. Tellier dragged her to her chair and set her down in it. "Where's Momma, she here?" Her voice had gone thick. One side of her mouth twisted up as if trying to grin.

"She's coming," he answered quickly, searching her softening face for a hint of the little sister he could barely remember. "Be here in a minute."

For all the death he'd experienced, for all that he knew this would

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come, Peter Tellier retained a childlike incomprehension of how someone so close could slip away while he watched, while he held her.

She was only dozing between performances, he told himself. She often did that. She would be all right. He straightened her up, tucked the afghan across her lap. He found a few large pieces of the chocolate lace and placed them on her lap, too.

Behind him, the clavichord fluttered into being. He turned and stared at it as at some horrible and totally alien object. He could not stand to hear that music again. Not ever again.

He forgot his jacket but climbed down into the snow like a figure out of history himself, in lace and velvet and trousers that buttoned just below the knee. The lights of civilization lay across the water, down the hill. He wondered if he would survive the walk.

Within, the house stood silent for a time.

Dust motes dancing in the sunbeams settled on the clavichord. The girl with the feather duster skipped over to it and began whisking at the surfaces, the keys, the bench, until young Mozart in red waistcoat came marching out and angrily ordered her away. Mozart shooed her along as if herding a cow. She pranced ahead of him, smiling blissfully as if he were proclaiming undying love. Mozart vanished as she settled into the Beidermeier chair with coquettish grace. In the other chair, the ghost of Michael Haydn glanced reprovingly her way.

Mozart returned from behind the chair and headed for the clavichord. To the right, with both hands clasped beneath her bosom, Maria Lipp watched him for her cue to begin.

Susanne heard a little noise behind her and looked around to find her older brother closing the doors with great care. He was dressed in a wonderful costume just like Mozart's, but he put one finger to his lips to silence any outburst she might have had, then tiptoed into the shadows. She glanced surreptitiously at Haydn but he hadn't noticed Peter's arrival.

Susanne leaned down and placed her feather duster on the floor. Her feet dangled above it. She gripped the arms of her chair tightly, as if the chair were about to soar into the sky and carry her away to fabulous lands. "Regina coeli," she named herself, then closed her eyes as Mozart's slender hands descended upon the keys. ●

—for Sycamore Hill, 1987

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" 'Twas Saint Cian's pillow," said Hogan, "an' rough when he got it—rough as a pike's kiss. Smooth it was when he died, for his head had smoothed it sixty years. Couldn't a maid have done it nicer, an' where the stone had worn away was the Virgin. Her picture, belike, sir, in the markin's that'd been in the stone."

It sounded as if he meant to talk no more, so I said, "What would he want with a stone pillow, Pat?" This though I knew the answer, simply because the night and the lonesome wind sweeping in off the Atlantic had made me hungry for a human voice.

"Not for his own sins, sure, for he'd none. But for yours, sir, an' mine. There was others, too, that come to live on this island."

"Other hermits, you mean?"

Hogan nodded. "An' when they was gone the fisherfolk come, me own folk with them. 'Twas they that built this chapel here, an' they set the holy stone above the door, for he was dead an' didn't want it. When it was stormin' they'd make a broom, an' dip it in the water, an' sprinkle the holy stone, an' the storm would pass. But if it was stormin' bad, they'd carry the stone to the water an' dip it in."

I nodded, thinking how hard and how lonely life must have been for them on the Inniskeas, and of fishermen drowned. "What happened to it, Pat?"

" 'Twas sunk in the bay in me grandfather's time." Hogan paused, but I could see that he was thinking—still talking in himself, as he himself would have said. "Some says it was the pirates an' some the protestants. They told that to the woman that come from Dublin, an' she believed them."

I had been in Hogan's company for three days, and was too sage a hound to go haring off after the woman from Dublin; in any event, I knew already that she was the one who had fenced the cromlech at the summit of the island. So I said, "But what do you think, Pat? What really happened to it?"

"The bishop took it. Me own grandfather saw him, him that was dead when I was born. Or me great grandfather it might be, one or the other don't matter. But me father told me, an' the bishop took it Christmas Eve."

The wind was rising. Hogan's boat was snug enough down in the little harbor, but I could hear the breakers crash not two hundred yards from where we sat.

"There was never a priest here, only this an' a man to take care of it. O'Dea his name was."

Because I was already thinking of writing about some of the things he told me (though in the event I have waited so long) I said, "That was your grandfather, Pat, I feel certain."

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"A relative, no doubt, sir," Hogan conceded, "for they were all relations on this island, more or less. But me grandfather was only a lad. O'Dea cared for the place when he wasn't out in his boat. 'Twas the women, you see, that wetted the holy stone, when the men were away."

I said, "It's a pity we haven't got it now, but if it's in the bay it ought to be wet enough."

" 'Tis not, sir. 'Tis in Dublin, in their big museum there, an' dry as a bone. The woman from there fetched it this summer."

"I thought you said the bishop threw it into the bay."

"She had a mask for her face," Hogan continued, as though he had not heard me, "an' a rubber bathin' costume for the rest of her, an' air in a tin tied to her back, just like you see." (He meant, "as I have seen it on television.") "Three days she dove from Kilkelly's boat. Friday it was she brought it up in two pieces. Some say she broke it under the water to make the bringing up easier." Hogan paused to light his pipe.

I asked, "Did the bishop throw it into the bay?"

"In a manner of speakin', sir. It all began when he was just a young priest, do you see? The bishop that was before him had stuck close to the cathedral, as sometimes they will. In the old days it was not easy, journeyin'. Very bad, it was, in winter. 'If you'd seen the roads before they were made, you'd thank the Lord for General Wade.' "

Having had difficulties of my own in traveling around the west of Ireland in a newish Ford Fiesta, I nodded sympathetically.

"So this one, when he got the job, he made a speech. 'The devil take me,' he says, 'if ever I say mass Christmas Eve twice in the same church.' "

"And the devil took him," I suggested.

"That he did not, sir, for the bishop was as good as his word. As the times wore on, there was many a one that begged him to stop, but there was no holdin' him. Come the tag end of Advent, off he'd go. An' if he heard that there was one place worse than another, it's where he went. One year a priest from Ballycroy went on the pilgrimage, an' he told the bishop a bit about Inniskeen, havin' been once or twice. 'Send word,' says the bishop, 'to this good man O'Dea. Tell him to have a boat waitin' for me at Erris.'

"They settled it by a fight, an' it was me grandfather's own father that was to bring him."

"Ah," I said.

"Me grandfather wanted to come along to help with the boat, sure, but his father wouldn't allow it, it was that rough, an' he had to wait in the chapel—right here, sir—with his mother. They was all here a long time before midnight, sure, talkin' the one to the other an' waitin' on the

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bishop, an' me grandfather—recollect he was but a little lad, sir—he fell asleep.

"Next thing he knew, his mother was shakin' him. 'Wake up, Sean, for he's come!' He wakes an' sits up, rubbin' his eyes, an' there's the bishop. But Lord, sir, there wasn't half there that should've been! Late as the sun rises at Christmas, it was near the time.

"It didn't matter a hair to His Excellency. He shook all the men by the hand, an' smiled at all the women, an' patted me grandfather's head, an' blessed everybody. Then he begun the mass. You never heard the like, sir. When they sang, there was angels singin' with them. Sure they couldn't see them, but they knew that they was there an' they could hear them. An' when the bishop preached, they saw the Gates an' got the smell of Heaven. It was like cryin' for happiness, an' it was forever. Me father said the good man used to cry a bit himself when he talked of it—which he did, sir, every year about this time, until he left this world.

"When the mass was over the bishop blessed them all again, an' he give O'Dea a letter, an' O'Dea kissed his ring, which was an honor to him after. Me grandfather saw his father waiting to take the bishop back to Erris, an' knew he'd been in the back of them. Right back there, sir."

We were burning wreckage we had picked up on the beach earlier. Hogan paused to throw a broken timber on the fire.

"The stone, Pat," I said.

"The bishop took it, sir, sure. After he give the letter, he points at it, do you see," Hogan pointed to the empty niche, "an' he says, 'Sorry I am, O'Dea, but I must have that.' Then O'Dea gets up on a stool—'twas what they sat on here—an' gives it to him, an' off he goes with me grandfather's father.

"All natural, sir. But me grandfather lagged behind when the women went home, an' as soon as there wasn't one lookin', off he runs after the bishop, for he'd hopes his father'd allow him this time, it bein' not so rough as the night before. You know where the rock juts, sir? You took a picture from there."

"Of course," I said.

"Me grandfather run out onto that rock, sir, for there's a bit of a moon by then an' he's wantin' to see if they'd put out. They hadn't, sir. He sees his father there in the boat, holdin' it close in for the bishop. An' he sees the bishop, holdin' the holy stone an' steppin' into it. Up comes the sun, an' devil a boat, or bishop, or father, or holy stone there is.

"Me grandfather's father's body washed up on Duvillaun, but never the bishop's. He'd wanted the holy stone, do you see, to weight him. Or some say to sleep on, there on the bottom. 'Tis the same thing, maybe."

I nodded. In that place, with the wind moaning around the ruined stone chapel, it did not seem impossible or even strange.

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"They're all dead now, sir. There's not a man alive that was born on these islands, or a woman, either. But they do say the ghosts of them that missed midnight mass can be seen comin' over the bay Christmas Eve, for they was buried on the mainland, sir, most of 'em, or died at sea like the bishop. I never seen 'em, mind, an' don't want to."

Hogan was silent for a long time after that, and so was I.

At last I said, "You're suggesting that I come back here and have a look."

Hogan knocked out his pipe. "You've an interest in such things, sir, an' so I thought I ought to mention it. I could take you out by daylight an' leave you here with your food an' sleepin' bag, an' your camera. Christmas Day, I'd come by for you again."

"I have to go to Bangor, Pat."

"I know you do, sir."

"Let me think about it. What was in the letter?"

" 'Twas after New Year's when they read it, sir, for O'Dea wouldn't let it out of his hands. Sure there wasn't a soul on the island that could read, an' no school. It says the bishop had drowned on his way to Inniskeen to say the midnight mass, an' asked the good people to make a novena for his soul. The priest at Erris wrote it, two days after Christmas."

Hogan lay down after that, but I could not. I went outside with a flashlight and roamed over the island for an hour or more, cold though it was.

I had come to Inniskeen, to the westernmost of Ireland's westernmost island group, in search of the remote past. For I am, among various other things, a writer of novels about that past, a chronicler of Xerxes and "King" Pausanias. And indeed the past was here in plenty. Sinking vessels from the Spanish Armada had been run aground here. Vikings had stridden the very beaches I paced, and earlier still, neolithic people had lived here largely upon shellfish, or so their middens suggested.

And yet it seemed to me that night that I had not found the past, but the future; for they were all gone, as Hogan had said. The neolithic people had fallen, presumably, before the modern, Celtic Irish, becoming one of the chief strands of Irish fairy lore. The last of St. Cian's hermits had died in grace, leaving no disciple. The fishermen had lived here for two hundred years or more, generation after generation, harvesting the treacherous sea and tiny gardens of potatoes; and for a few years there had actually been a whaling station on North Island.

No more.

The Norwegians sailed from their whaling station for the last time long ago. Long ago the Irish Land Commission removed the fisherfolk and resettled them; their thatched stone cottages are tumbling down, as the hermits' huts did earlier. Gray sea-geese nest upon Inniskeen again,

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and otters whistle above the whistling wind. A few shaggy black cattle are humanity's sole contribution; I cannot call them wild, because they do not know human beings well enough for fear. In the Inniskeas our race is already extinct. We stayed a hundred centuries, and are gone.

I drove to Bangor the following day, December twenty-second. There I sent two cables and made transatlantic calls, learning only that my literary agent, who might perhaps have acted, had not the slightest intention of doing so before the holidays, and that my publishers, who might certainly have acted if they chose, would not.

Already all of Ireland, which delights in closing at every opportunity, was gleefully locking its doors. I would have to stay in Bangor over Christmas, or drive on to Dublin (praying the while for an open petrol station), or go back to Erris. I filled my rented Ford's tank until I could literally dabble my forefinger in gasoline and returned to Erris.

I will not regale you here with everything that went wrong on the twenty-fourth. Hogan had an errand that could neither be neglected nor postponed. His usually-dependable motor would not start, so that eventually we were forced to beg the proprietor of the only store that carried such things to leave his dinner to sell us a spark plug. It was nearly dark before we pushed off, and the storm that had been brewing all day was ready to burst upon us.

"We're mad, you know," Hogan told me. "Me as much as you." He was at the tiller, his pipe clenched between his teeth; I was huddled in the bow in a life jacket, my hat pulled over my ears. "How'll you make a fire, sir? Tell me that."

Through chattering teeth, I said that I would manage somehow.

"No you won't, sir, for we'll never get there."

I said that if he were waiting for me to tell him to turn back, he would have to wait until we reached Inniskeen; and I added—bitterly—that if Hogan wanted to turn back I could not prevent him.

"I've taken your money an' given me word."

"We'll make it, Pat."

As though to give me the lie, lightning lit the bay.

"Did you see the island, then?"

"No," I said, and added that we were surely miles from it still.

"I must know if I'm steerin' right," Hogan said.

"Don't you have a compass?"

"It's no good for this, sir. We're shakin' too much." It was an ordinary pocket compass, as I should have remembered, and not a regular boat's compass in a binnacle.

After that I kept a sharp lookout forward. Low-lying North Island was invisible to my right, but from time to time I caught sight of higher, closer, South Island. The land I glimpsed at times to our left might have

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been Duvillaun or Innisglora, or even Achill, or all three. Black Rock Light was visible only occasionally, which was somewhat reassuring. At last, when the final, sullen twilight had vanished, I caught sight of Inniskeen only slightly to our left. Pointing, I half rose in the bow as Hogan swung it around to meet a particularly dangerous comber. It lifted us so high that it seemed certain we were being flipped end-for-end; we raced down its back and plunged into the trough, only to be lifted again at once.

"Hang on!" Hogan shouted. At that moment lightning cut the dark bowl of the sky from one horizon to the other.

I pointed indeed, but I pointed back toward Erris. I would have spoken if I could, but I-did not need to. In two hours or less we were sitting comfortably in Hogan's parlor, over whiskey toddies. The German tradition of the Christmas Tree, which we Americans now count among American customs, has not taken much root in Ireland. But there was an Advent Calendar with all its postage-stamp-sized windows wide, and gifts done up in brightly colored papers. And the little crèche (we would call it a crib set) with its as-yet empty manger, cracked, ethereal Mary, and devoted Joseph, had more to say about Christmas than any tree I have ever seen.

"Perhaps you'll come back next year," Hogan suggested after we had related our adventures, "an' then we'll have another go."

I shook my head.

His wife looked up from her knitting, and with that single glance understood everything I had been at pains to hide. "What was it you saw?" she asked.

I did not tell her, then or later. Nor am I certain that I can tell you. It was no ghost, or at least there was nothing of sheet or skull or ectoplasm, none of the conventional claptrap of movies and Halloween. In appearance, it was no more than the floating corpse of a rather small man with longish white hair. He was dressed in dark clothes, and his eyes—I saw them plainly as he rolled in the wave—were open. No doubt it was the motion of the water; but as I stared at him for half a second or so in the lightning's glare, it appeared to me that he raised his arm and gestured, invitingly and with the utmost good will, in the direction of Inniskeen.

I have never returned to Ireland, and never will. And yet I have no doubt at all that the time will soon come when I, too, shall attend his midnight mass in the ruined chapel. What will follow that service, I cannot guess.

In Christ's name, I implore mercy for my soul. ●

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R. Garcia y Robertson has written SF, fantasy, and nonfiction. The author has sold stories to *Amazing, Weird Tales, F&SF,* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction.* Before becoming a full-time writer, he taught history of technology, history of science, and history of the future at UCLA and Villanova. "The Wagon God's Wife," is taken from history. It is a retelling of an incident from the *Flateyjarbok—the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason.* Gunnar Helming really did spend a winter in Sweden, and this is the story he told, more or less, upon his return to Norway.

THE WAGON GOD'S WIFE

by R. Garcia y Robertson

art: George Thompson

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A lifeless morning sky spread between the peaks, bringing no fog, no mist, no breath of wind. Birds did not fly. Frost wrung every drop of water from the air. A single ripple lay on the snowfield, a white mound marked by an upright spear.

Snow cracked at the base of the spear shaft. First fingers, then a hand clawed upward, clutching the shaft, dragging an arm behind it. The mound lifted. The bent back of a big man broke through the white shell, snow sliding from his fur cloak and leather jacket. With frost hanging in his hair and beard, Gunnar Helming glared at the bleak morning through his one good eye.

Climbing to his feet, Gunnar greeted the day with a shuffling dance. First he shook one stiff leg, then the other. Flapping his arms about, he staggered in a circle, working life back into tired limbs. He had felt warmer sleeping under the snow.

Dance done, he stood panting, watching little puffs of mist shoot out of his mouth, to freeze and fall as ice on his beard. His good eye saw a twist of smoke rising from a black stand of pines. This thin climbing thread was the only movement in the frigid landscape. Leaning on his spear, he set off, praying for a breakfast fire beneath the smoke. Gunnar recalled feasts in King Olaf's hall, wishing now that he had eaten more and listened to the bards less. He had tossed aside bones that might have been split for the marrow, and left behind crusts of bread he would now be happy to chew. Alone in heathen Sweden, he did not hope for royal feasting, expecting that the Swedes were as likely to eat him as feed him.

Thick, powdery snow dragged at boots and leggings. Where the drifts were deep, he swung his arms to make a path. The work was exhausting. Without food and warmth, Gunnar would soon have to lie down and die. He clearly heard his Saxon grandfather saying, "Do not wait for ale and old age to carry you off, lying in the straw like a sick cow. A man should die with sword in hand, with Wodan's name on his lips." This speech had impressed Gunnar, though he had been but six summers, sitting on his grandfather's knee and a long way from ale and old age. But going sword in hand to Wodan was a pagan wish. King Olaf Tryggvason had made Gunnar Helming a Christian. He could not follow the Prince of Peace and wish for death in battle. Even now, Gunnar took grim comfort in walking away from a quarrel, fleeing a fight as Jesus would have done.

To die so far from the sea was the real sadness. One summer when the Mermaid's Meadow was fit for plowing, Gunnar had seen his grandfather go down to the sea and not come back. Ever since that summer, Gunnar had set his hopes on the sea death. To be trampled by the white-maned waves and rolled into a seaweed shroud was a decent death for a Christian Norseman. Now he no longer expected to sleep in the Whale's Bed, living

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or dead. Hemmed in by a bowl of mountains, the only waves that Gunnar's good eye could see were peaks of white-capped stone frozen against the sky. Buckling at the knees, his legs gave way before he got to the pines. "Get to the trees," his tired heart told him. He crawled towards the dark splotch of wood, frozen fingers locked around his spear—the bit of spar that a drowning man clings to. Pain turned to numbness. Past the first pines, he smelled the woodsmoke. Looking up from the white blanket, between black pine trunks, Gunnar saw a circular mound of sod with smoke rising straight from its rounded peak; an old burial mound tied to heaven by a rope of smoke. Standing stones led straight to a curtained entrance in the tumulus. Fire beckoned from behind that hide door. "I am warmth. I am life."

Numb fingers let his spear slip. Bending his body in the middle, he pushed with his hips; a fur-clad worm wriggling forward, leaving a twisted track through the snow. Collapsing short of the door, chest heaving, he prayed for help. "Lord Christ do not leave me in sight of shelter." His world dimmed and shrank. Only the mound entrance stayed crisp, the bright circle at the mouth of a darkening cave.

Without a sound, the wide leather door swung aside. A towering woman of supernatural beauty stood in the doorway, tall as a masthead and proud as death. Her hairy calf-skin boots were laced with thick leather thongs, and a beaten silver band circled her stiff waist. Raven hair framed fine ivory features. Deep, dark eyes stared down at him. On her shoulder sat a large hawk, preening silver and copper plumage.

This imposing woman stood silent, unmoving. The hawk cocked her head, fixing Gunnar with one unblinking eye. The black cavern closed around him.

Gunnar awoke feverish hot. Heavy furs pressed him into straw that prickled against his naked back and hips. Stirring the straw was another sort of warmth; round, living warmth. Firm, smooth woman's flesh rubbed him, massaged him, kneaded him. Full breasts and strong thighs pinned his fingers. Heaven was every bit as good as the priests had promised.

He opened his eyes. The awesome woman who had stood in the doorway lay atop him, her long hair cascading over them, enclosing their faces in a black tent. Sturdy calves curled around his legs, pressing their hips together. Her soft mouth covered his, breathing life back into his body. Mother naked; she did not shut her eyes like Christian girls did.

Gunnar's limbs awoke. One hand caught hold of her breast, the other reached up between lanky thighs, pulling on a buttock to bring them closer. The woman lifted her lovely head and laughed, "Have you decided to live?"

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"Live? Woman, what you are doing would raise the dead." Gunnar held on as well as he could, trying to twist her over, hoping his whole body would be awake when he had her properly on her back.

Strong and fast as a sow-bear, she slid sideways, still laughing, "I should be rubbing your feet, working the blood back into your toes. You might lose them."

"Forget my toes. I can count them when we are done."

A long white arm held him off, luminous eyes studied him with stern amusement. "I can see your blood is working, but we do not even know each other."

"I am a Helming. My Christian name is Gunnar, and I am awfully pleased to meet you." Keeping a resolute grip on her inner thigh, he flung an arm out to pin her shoulders.

The handsome she-troll slipped under his pin, stiffening her arm to keep her distance. "People call me Freyja, and I have no Christian name—but I do have a husband."

Gunnar sank back. The woman was being awkward. A pagan marriage did not matter—unless her man was ill-humored and near at hand—but Gunnar would get nowhere until this beautiful giantess was more willing.

Without letting go, Gunnar looked beyond her. Leather bed curtains were tied back, letting in heat from the firepit. Gunnar saw no man about, no man's things. No boar spear leaned by the door, and the only breeches hung over the fire were his. The mound house was bigger than any he had been in, but beside him was a woman who needed her headroom. Dirt walls, dugout floor, a log roof; all clean work, and the bed showed quality, sturdy, stuffed with fresh straw. Among Swedes, the place could pass for a palace.

"You have an uncommon method of warming a stranger. King Olaf's physicians never cured frostbite so fast, nor made the sick heart so merry."

Freyja nodded, her dark hair spilling over snow white breasts. "This is the natural way to warm a man. Any woman knows what makes a man's heart merry."

He rolled a bit closer, holding hard to her rump. "It is a poor healer who leaves her cure half accomplished." This time she did not move away, but merely arched a black eyebrow. Gunnar rubbed his free palm softly over a pale nipple, leaning closer and kissing her throat. Again she did not draw back.

"The most important part has been missed." Flinging a leg over her, Gunnar got the leverage to keep her still while he made ready to mount. "Your husband need not concern us. I am an unmarried Christian, unable to acknowledge pagan rites. In the eyes of Christ, you have no husband."

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Looking serious, almost sad, she said, "I am still bound by my marriage, and if we are to finish this warming, you must do one thing first." Wetting her finger with her tongue, she ran the cold nail down his chest, all the way to the navel.

He squirmed at her touch. "One thing? Is it wood to cut or grain to thresh? I will do a whole week's work when we are done."

She leaned closer. He could feel the long stretch of her body, her breath sighing in his ear. "I want you to kill my husband and brother."

Gunnar sat bolt upright, save one short limb, which went limp. He had forgotten what bloodthirsty heathens the Swedes were. Seeming disappointed, the woman sat up also, pulling furs about her hips and belly, giving him a petulant look. "I thought that since you were a Christian, the deed might come easier. I need a strong, willing Christian to rid me of my husband and brother."

"Lady, you have uncommonly strange notions of Christianity, even for a Swede. Christ forbids murdering strangers and chance acquaintances without reasonable cause."

She shrugged her nude shoulders, the easy movement making her seem tempting again. "Perhaps we see the wrong sort of Christians crossing the Jontun Spine so late in the year. Even in High Summer, Christians hardly come to our mountains. Once snows fill the passes, all we see are outlaws and red-handed killers, fleeing King's justice or clan vengeance."

Her words struck him hard. "It is true that I am an outlaw; but before he exiled me, King Olaf Tryggvason made me a Christian. I try to tread in Christ's footsteps, and I left Norway rather than do violence to King Olaf's thralls."

Freyja asked why he had been outlawed. Gunnar looked up at the log ceiling. "A king is free to call his greed taxation, and his misdeeds justice. King Olaf Tryggvason is a great hero, as great as Ragnar Hairy Breeches or Hrolf Kraki, who tweaked the Pig of the Swedes' snout. It is a fine thing to hear tales told about such heroes, but it is a harder thing to live with one. Being great gives a man an inflated opinion of himself, and makes a king insufferable."

Freyja said the King Olaf must be a great king indeed, to judge by the numbers of men fleeing Norway these days.

"A man makes his mark as much by the quality of his enemies as by the quality of his friends," observed Gunnar.

She pursed her lips. "If you were to add my husband and brother to your enemies, then I would think better of you."

He was sorry to hear the subject of murder come up a second time. "Woman, I owe you my life, as well as my fingers and toes; but you are making it hard for me to feel happy about it. I will not commit double

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manslaughter for you, though you are as beautiful a woman as I have ever seen with bedstraw in her hair."

Freyja stood up, saying in a sulky voice, "Who spoke of double manslaughter? My husband and brother are one and the same."

"You are married to your *brother?*" Adding incest to the crimes that the Swedes passed their winters with made even the clean straw feel contaminated.

"What if I told you that my husband-brother delights in the blood of innocents and strangers?"

"I would say that a woman who wants to be rid of an unnatural husband might make up any sort of story." No number of large and beautiful women were worth being dragged into pagan quarrels.

"Come," she said coldly, "and I will show you just how unnatural my marriage is."

Standing, he could see she was a full hand's span taller than him, and Gunnar was not a small man. With great swinging strides, she led him around the paved firepit and past the shaft of sunlight falling through the smokehole. Trotting to keep up, Gunnar saw a spacious byre with pens for sheep and goats. Stalls held a milk cow and a beautiful black mare. Herbs, cheeses, and onions hung overhead. Mice scampered between wooden barrels of fermented milk. Gunnar liked the warm mix of smells: drying herbs: cold cheeses, raw dirt, and fresh dung.

In the rear of the mound house was something much less to Gunnar's liking. Wagon ruts in the tramped earth led straight into a heathen shrine as weird and dark as any that King Olaf had burned in Norway. Against the earth wall was the god-cart itself: a light four-wheeled wagon, elaborately carved, and decorated with twisted vinewood. A small alderwood stool served as a seat for the driver. Long ash poles formed the shafts, running all the way to the rear of the carriage and resting on the double axles.

Sitting square in the middle of the cart was a huge heathen idol, rough cut from a living apple tree in the vague shape of a man. All the artist's skill had gone into the wagon, with little to spare for the image itself. Large limbs stuck out below the head, each one ending in five branch fingers. At the base, the trunk was split into two stump legs resting on the wagon. A burst of green growth sprouted from the topped-off trunk, with leaves and small branches hanging down like shaggy hair and a bushy beard. Gunnar imagined that he could still smell the apples. Peering out of the foliage were two knot eyes, on either side of a lopped-off limb that might be a nose.

A helmet made of boar's teeth sat tilted atop the trunk. Its nose guard was a boar's face of beaten bronze, with tiny ruby chips for eyes. A rope twisted around the trunk supported a sealskin bag. At the crotch, where

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the stump legs divided, a long stone phallus was jammed into the wood. The tree man had a rock-hard, and permanent, erection.

All this might have been more amusing, if Gunnar were not standing stark naked, staring at green leaves growing impossibly from a hacked and rootless tree.

"Here," said Freyja in a husky whisper, "is my twin brother Freyr, who is also my husband."

"Forgive me, Lady, but I fail to see the family resemblance." He stared at the stone phallus, and thought to himself that she must have had some wedding night. No wonder the heathen giantess was mad as a jaybird.

Eyes glittering with anger she said, "He is my twin in life and in death. I am Freyja, Goddess-on-Earth, and I will give myself only to the man who hacks that idol apart. There is a living god in that wood, who will resist death in the flesh. To defeat him will require all the strength your God can give you."

As she spoke Gunnar saw the leaves shake, though there was no draft to move them. Cold returned to his fingers and toes. "King Olaf Tryggvason made me a Christian, telling me to cast aside heathen superstition. *Idols are wood and stone; no more, no less. To smash a statue is to admit* its power, and in my mind the man who breaks an idol is as much an idolater as the man who bows to one."

She gave him a keen look, full of challenge and contempt. "I had heard that the best of Christians were cowards; now I see it is so." Dropping her fur, Freyja stalked out of the shrine, showing him her long bare back. Shaking his head, Gunnar followed, watching her muscular buttocks bunch and release. If Swedes were not insanely superstitious, where would be the sting in exile?

Freyja put on a white linen shift trimmed with blueberry dye. From the black pot over the fire, she poured him a bowl of stew. Still aloof, she brought bread and a mug of sour milk to go with the stew. As he ate, Gunnar watched her lay out his clothes, dry and smelling of smoke from the fire. He could not tell where Freyja's passion and anger had gone. Perhaps he was just no longer important to her. That thought bothered him, as much as her splendid body and proud bearing. He watched her adding to her costume; an amber necklace, bracelets, and finger rings, a blue-black cloak with a lambskin hood, finally a pair of catskin gloves. She looked half a witch and half a great lady expecting guests.

Coming from outside the mound-house, Gunnar heard the ring of metal on metal, unmistakable, starting far off but getting swiftly closer. Glancing about, Gunnar wished for his spear, seeing a great shortage of edged metal in the place. No axes nor boar spears stood by the door, and the kitchen held no cleavers, not even an iron spit. Grabbing a broom from

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the corner, Gunnar decided to defend himself with the handle if the Swedes turned ugly.

Voices, like children chanting, grew in volume to something part way between men's and women's singing. Clutching his broom, Gunnar braced himself for an onslaught of Swedes. In a whirl of skirts, the Swedes swirled into the mound house, clinking tiny cymbals between their fingers. Gunnar thought that the mincing procession must have consisted of Sweden's ugliest women, all singing in squeaky voices. They wore white ruffled dresses, and colored veils hid their faces. Filing past Gunnar, they made erotic gestures, thrusting their hips and waving thick fingers at him. Gunnar was not aroused. He found their movements too oafish to be enticing, and they had incredibly heavy body hair, even for Swedes.

Sitting down, he looked up under their veils, to see just how ill-favored these women were. He had to catch himself, to stop from falling down laughing. They were *men*. Their chins were shaven, their lips painted, and silver hoops hung in their ears; but beneath the swaying veils he saw long cheekbeards, and beneath their skirts, hairy calves. He stopped worrying about edged weapons, confident he could scatter this flock of Swedes in skirts with his broom.

Behind these unmanly men walked a lone girl; not buxom, barely into womanhood. The contrast with the veiled men was plain. How could he have been fooled for a heartbeat? She was slim and virginal, with thin hips, small breasts, and a wistful unveiled face. Seeing Gunnar, her eyes went wide. She looked away, then looked back. Gunnar thought he saw puzzlement, hope, and some concern on her face.

Getting up, he followed the file of Swedes into the back of the mound house. There the men danced around the shrine, whirled their skirts, sang in falsetto, and acted foolish. Several times they thrust the young girl towards the idol on the wagon. Though the singing was in Old Swedish, similar to pig grunting, Gunnar understood that the girl's name was Gerd, and that they were offering her to the wagon god. The god image shook its leaves, which sent the dancing men into adoring ecstasy. Gunnar thought that some people are easily pleased. The simple Swedes took a draft down the smokehole as a sign from their god. If mice ate their harvest offerings, they probably counted it a miracle.

Then the singing, mincing men flounced out of the mound house, leaving Gunnar with the two women and their tree god. Freyja closed the ceremony by standing straight in front of the idol and spitting on its trunk. Her face was impassive, and Gunnar could not tell if she spat out of contempt or reverence. Perhaps Swedes thought spittle was sacred.

For the rest of the afternoon, Gunnar rested, watching the women do what women usually did; cleaning, cooking, weaving, spinning, and the

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like. Such tasks normally did not interest Gunnar, but he found Freyja's strong figure fascinating. She did most of the work with easy grace, directing Gerd to the simpler chores such as drawing water and feeding the fire. Gerd was quick at taking up tasks in a new place, and Gunnar thought she would make a hard-working wife for some undeserving Swede. This girl, having never exchanged a word with Gunnar, gave him shy glances and a smile or two. Freyja—who had dragged him from the snow, warmed wild passion in him with her body, and then invited him to kill her husband—ignored him completely. Her hawk, sitting up near the smokehole, paid him more heed, turning an occasional cold eye his way.

Such contrary and incomprehensible behavior was natural for women, but it bothered Gunnar none the less. Freyja's aloofness drew him in. He despaired at how close he had been to having her, picturing every white curve he had seen in the straw, from rosy nipples down to long strong legs. Here was a woman who could squeeze the juice from a man and leave him to die happy.

At dinner, it was Gerd who served him, setting out more good stew, boiled roots, and a generous length of blood sausage. Cutting the blood sausage with a wooden knife, her arm rubbed Gunnar's. Fine gold hair fell against his cheek. Gunnar looked into her large eyes and the girl blushed, shrinking back a bit, but staying within easy reach. Gunnar glanced at Freyja's straight towering figure. She seemed not the least concerned with Gunnar or Gerd, but stared moodily into the rear of the mound house.

Gunnar started to thank Gerd in stumbling Swedish, but stopped. The girl was also staring into the shrine, but with a look of sheer terror. Following Gerd's frightened gaze, Gunnar saw the huge idol stepping off the wagon. If the blood sausage on Gunnar's plate had stood up and started speaking, he could not have been more shocked. His stomach took a heave, and the good stew meat in his mouth tasted like so much straw.

No longer an inert trunk and limbs, the idol was transformed into a striding horror that brushed the ceiling of the mound house. Half-human, half-tree, and completely awful, he shambled towards Gunnar, with long forelimbs hanging almost to the ground. The monster was stark naked, but for the boar's tooth helmet on his head and the seal-skin bag tied about his waist. His rock phallus remained tremendously erect.

The bench creaked as the idol sat down, and the table groaned as he leaned towards Gunnar. Great hollow eyes looked at Gunnar through green hair on either side of a crooked nose. "Call me Freyr," said the idol. "What sort of stranger are you?"

"The sort who wishes he had stayed a stranger." Gunnar's heart raced so fast he could hear it galloping.

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Freyr shook the whole mound house with brazen laughter, then asked, "Are you by chance a Christian stranger?"

"Not by chance," he said, "but by order of King Olaf Tryggvason."

"Not the Olaf Tryggvason who knocked Thor from his chariot at Thrandheim and rode my sacred stallion through the holy precinct? Not the Olaf Tryggvason who threated to maim or kill every Swede living in Norway if we did not adopt the Christian life?"

"The world is not large enough to hold two Olaf Tryggvasons," said Gunnar. He still hoped to get by with mild answers. Freyr seemed to be the sort of troll who broke boulders and wrestled bears for amusement.

"Are you that obnoxious kind of Christian," asked Freyr, "who goes about burning temples and sneering at religion? Nothing puts me in a worse mood than intolerance. I take such atheists and toss them in a bog tied to a heavy stone for company, or hang them from oaks as pious treats for the Black Birds of Odin."

Gunnar shook his head. "No, I am one of those meek Christians you may have heard about, who turns his cheek and tries to live at ease with his neighbors."

Freyr waved a limb that Gunnar could have sat on. "Sister, bring small beer for my meek friend here; but no strong ale that might make him surly." Freyja poured a tankard for Gunnar. Gerd was huddled in the pantry, trembling and shaking.

"I neither eat nor drink," said the idol, "but I like to see a man enjoy himself—if that is possible for a Christian. I have only a single pleasure." He lifted Freyja's dress and smacked her bare rump, winking at Gunnar with one great eye. "My sister-wife; you have met her I suppose?"

Gunnar said that they had met. Freyja said nothing, nor did she wince when her brother-husband hit her.

"Have you had her in the straw yet?" asked the Wagon God with another wink.

Gunnar was now more than happy he had lost the morning's wrestling match. He could honestly say he had not copulated with her.

Freyr leaned closer to Gunnar. "I will wager she tried to warm you up."

Gunnar stammered to find a defense that did not sound guilty, but Freyr shook his hideous head. "No need to deny it. I am not a man that misses a chew or two once the loaf's been broken. I know women, playing at being pure, putting you off when you have the itch, pretending they do not like it. Turn your back, though, and off they go, rutting like she-goats among the bucks. They cannot fool me, and I have my own ways of keeping them faithful." He glanced over at Gerd, hiding behind the milk barrels, and laughed again.

As much as Gunnar wanted to stay on the monster's good side, he felt

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sorry for the women; especially for Gerd, who seemed in a fine state of terror. He took a big swallow of small beer, hoping it would cheer him.

Freyja refilled his tankard, then turned and went back to the kitchen.

"What a proud bitch my sister is," said the ogre. "I bet when she was rubbing up to you, she did not mention her age. She is older than the pines and oaks, older than the rivers. We were born at the same birth, straight out of Mother Earth, back at the Creation."

"She holds her age well," said Gunnar.

"For a long, long time she had it her own way. She bedded any buck she liked, making the best ones into kings. Not that being a king was so special then. Make a few mistakes and her women would start yapping for you to be sacrificed, to make way for new blood. Well, I tamed her and married her. Kings today do as they please, and never need listen to women."

Gunnar said he had seen that was so. "Olaf Tryggvason does not listen to anyone."

"He can thank me for that, bigoted Christian though he is," said Freyr. "Have some more small beer and drink to my health."

Relaxing, Gunnar finished off his second tankard. Freyr was really no worse than one of King Olaf's berserks, bragging over beer about his women. The largest berserk was not half Freyr's size, but Gunnar had seen some just as ugly. Women had run at the sight of Split Nose Hrolf or Sven Rat Face. The fire burned down and starlight fell though the smokehole. Gunnar's only regret was drinking alone. Freyr kept pounding on the table, demanding beer for his friend. Freyja served the brew with neither complaint nor enthusiasm, while Gerd trembled in the earth pantry. Gunnar had been to happier feasts, where everyone shared the spirit of the evening.

At last the ogre stood up, looping a limb around Freyja's waist, saying, "Sister, you can leave the keg. It is time that you entertained your husband." With a nod to Gunnar, he dragged her behind the leather bed curtain.

The thought of Freyja's soft skin and that rock-hard phallus soured the small beer he'd drunk. Sobered, he pushed away from the table and tottered off to the byre to sleep in the hay with the sheep. He was pleased to find that Freyja's ewes were warm, and did not wallow in their own dung. Piling straw over himself, Gunnar was also glad that no noises came from behind the bed curtain. If Freyja was being hurt, he did not want to know it. If she was being pleasured, he wasn't sure that he wanted to know that, either. He reminded himself that he had not come over the Jontun Spine to reform the heathen. Nor was it Christian to come between man and wife, even if the marriage did not seem a happy one.

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Near to morning, he was awakened by something worming in between him and the sheep. It was the girl, her skinny body still shaking. Gunnar said in halting Swedish, "Gerd, are you scared by that tree-man?"

"No," she replied, "I am not scared, I am not Gerd, and that is not a tree-man. My name is Yusa, Freyr is a god, and I am terrified."

"Well, sleep with me," said Gunnar, "and I will see that you come to no harm."

He could tell she did not believe him, but she curled up with him anyway. She smelled like a Swede, and had more vermin than the sheep, but Gunnar was glad for the company. The poor child had probably never slept alone. Hel, this must be her first night away from the hovel.

Gunnar rolled out of the straw the next morning feeling fit as a flea, his frostbite completely cured. He did not need to count his toes to know that none had fallen off. He owed Freyja for that; he wished there were a safe way he could repay her. Gunnar cursed the luck that made Freyja a god's wife. Many men might want their women to be goddesses, but Gunnar was not so fussy. He would have been happier if she were a ploughman's wife . . . or better yet, unmarried.

Gerd, who called herself Yusa, was already up and busy with morning tasks. Freyr was back on his wagon, looking no more menacing than a poorly-pruned fruit tree. Feeling bolder, Gunnar took Freyja's hand as soon as she came by, asking her to sit with him. "There is no need for you to be cold as a whale's rump, all because I will not fight your husband."

She did not sit, but did not take her hand away either.

"Does he walk only by night?"

"He walks only when the sun is hidden."

Morning sunlight slanted through the entrance curtain and the smoke-hole. He eyed the light, noting, "We could leave now with a full day's start on him. I have seen wives leave happier husbands. A Christian would have a hard time even calling this a marriage."

She stood stock still, looking disgusted. "This was my shrine, my wagon, and my folk. I will not give them to him. If there are any crimes my brother has *not* committed, it is only out of sheer laziness. I am Goddess-on-Earth, and will have a husband of my choosing in his place. Do not expect to have me on the sly, like some pig keeper's thrall."

Gunnar thought that Freyr's breeches would be big to fill. "It is not my fight. Gerd, or Yusa, the young one, likes me, asking nothing in return."

Freyja drew her hand away. "What does she know? She is a simple child, who supposes you will be sacrificed."

"Sacrificed?"

"Yes, it has become the custom in good winters—when my husband

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is in a forgiving humor—to strangle Christians and squinty-eyed strangers at the Feast of the Dead."

Gunnar rubbed his good eye and started to rise, thinking that he could be a fair way off by sundown.

Freyja stopped him. "Do not worry. I am not as cold to you as you think. You will not be sacrificed. This winter is too special; the death of a Christian stranger would not do it justice."

Gunnar watched her walk away, feeling both relieved and slighted.

Gerd came over, saying she was between chores. Would he like his hair brushed and braided? Gunnar accepted, not near as pleased as he would have been a moment before. Now he felt like a goat being curry-combed for the knife. But the girl did a thorough job, not stopping until his hair and beard were soft and free of lice. Giving her playful thanks with the flat of his hand, Gunnar went out and washed his face in the snow, returning clean and refreshed.

That afternoon, the mincing men returned, still veiled like belly dancers from the Land of the Blue Men. Gunnar hid his laughter, not to taunt the addled; but the sight of their white frocks reduced Gerd to abject terror again. They lifted their veils to blow kisses at Gunnar, then hitched up the god's wagon and rolled their idol out into the open air. Freyja pinned a brooch of gold apple leaves on Gerd, then took the girl's unwilling hand, helping her up onto the cart.

It irked Gunnar to see Freyja going off without a word to him. The fire had gone out. The mound house looked cold and dark, as enticing as an open tomb. He asked Freyja where they were off to.

She looked down from atop the god-cart, as tall and commanding as a housecarl at a king's feast. "It is the Autumnal Procession. We go to the Fall Festival in the market village."

"And to feasting and drinking," added Gunnar.

"It will be a pagan festival, hardly fit for a Christian." Her voice was as crisp as the air.

"Fine," said Gunnar, "I will come only for the food and drink." How vexing to depend on a goddess' whim for every mortal need.

"The weather may be stormy for such a *peaceful* man," was all she said.

"I will suffer the weather." Even one good eye could see that the clouds still held snow.

"Come along then, you have been warned."

The cart jolted off with the two women riding up front and the men in dresses chanting along behind. Gunnar let them get well ahead, walking in a leisurely way, adopting the air of a disinterested traveler.

Their progress was all up and down, giving Gunnar many chances to rest while the cart was hauled out of one valley and coaxed down into

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another. The wagon and idol were too much for one horse, no matter how fine a black mare she was. The men in white had to help so often that they trampled on their skirts, tearing and muddying the hems.

Prepared to be appalled, Gunnar was not the least disappointed by Sweden. Each uncouth stone-and-mud farmstead held its sullen knot of Swedes. Many of the women were tall and pleasant to look on, but the men were all sturdy and brooding, an ugly combination. None seemed delighted by their god's progress. In Norway, passing dung carts drew more cheers. Such silent watchfulness made Gunnar uneasy, and the priests' singing had long ago stopped. There was only the occasional sob or sniffle from Gerd to lighten the jolly procession.

At the last pass, Gunnar saw the sun touching the western summits and watched clouds gather around the peaks. Frost made the way slippery, and the wagon had a hard time going over the summit. The exhausted priests asked Gunnar to push. He considered, then refused. "As much as I might like the exercise, moving the wagon would be too much like doing homage to your god."

The wagon tottered on even more slowly. Black air boiled above the pass and the storm wind threw hissing sleet at them, freezing into snow. The white-clad priests pushing the wagon groaned and rolled their eyes, as if snow were an especially bad omen. What else did they expect this high in the mountains so late in the year?

Freyja called down to Gunnar. "If you will not push, then please lead the horse. She will slip on the rocky down grade."

Wind buffeted the wagon. "I will do it," said Gunnar, "but only because I am hungry, not out of any homage to this tree." He was irritable, not having been fed since morning, but felt sympathy for the black mare. Such a horse deserved better than hauling heavy gods through the snow.

Big flat flakes flew straight in Gunnar's face. He had to put a hand up to protect his good eye, or he would have been blinded. The sky covered over, hiding the sun. Hearing muffled screams, Gunnar whirled about, clutching his spear in one hand, holding the bridle steady to calm the mare. The whole flock of priests thundered past him, skirts hiked above their hairy legs, hems flapping in the storm. Like so many frightened swans, they went hooting off down the trail towards the market village. Gunnar thought it strange conduct even for Swedes.

A brazen voice called out from behind and above. "Why are we not moving?" The idol was alive again, and seemed to have awoken out of sorts. Gunnar did not answer. It should be obvious even to wooden-headed heathen that the wagon was mired in a snowbank.

"Christian," the ogre called down to him, "come back here and push. Being late for festivity puts me in a bad humor."

"Lend a limb," said Gunnar, "or at least get down and lighten the

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wagon." There were limits to his helpfulness, even for heathen friends that threatened to snap him in half. Pushing the cart was an impossible task; he might as well push on the mountain. Gunnar would have taken off after the Swedes, but he dared not turn his back on an angered god looking bigger than a barn and uglier than he remembered. Freyja stood statue-still in the front of the cart, her hawk on her shoulder, Gerd gripping her legs. Did Freyja care what happened to him? Snowflakes clung to her lashes and long black mane. She gave Gunnar a cool, distant look.

"If we are to move, you had all best get down," Gunnar said, trying for a respectful tone. "The mare cannot pull anymore, and I cannot push such a load."

"If I step down, Christian, it shall be to hitch you in the horse's place, or slaughter you on the spot."

No wonder the priests had fled. They knew their god was a monster without patience. Helpless as a hog on ice, Gunnar stumbled back, hefting his spear. It felt like a stick in his hand.

Thrashing at the storm, the idol stepped down off the wagon. Aiming at an eye, Gunnar threw, putting his whole body behind the cast. The spear struck Freyr square in the face, hitting so hard that the shaft shattered.

The wound only made the tree-demon more hideous. Laughing, he stomped forward, wearing the spear point like a second nose. Gunnar dodged around the ghoul. Grabbing up the longest piece of the broken shaft, he struck the side of Freyr's neck as hard as he could. The shaft snapped again in his hand. He might as well have been beating a tree trunk.

Freyr turned, still laughing.

Gunnar had to keep moving, not let the troll touch him. Ducking beneath a swinging limb, he aimed a kick between Freyr's legs. Knocking the stone phallus loose might give the monster something to moan about. Freyr spun sideways. Gunnar missed his kick, spraining his foot against solid bark.

Toes broken, Gunnar limped crabwise, trying to hobble round behind the tree-god. Crooked fingers snagged Gunnar's cloak, jerking him backwards and off his feet. Landing hard, Gunnar felt the ghoul's enormous weight come down full on him. A limb pinned him by the throat.

He saw Freyr loosen his rope belt, making it into a noose. Blood singing in his ears, Gunnar beat at Freyr's mouth until his knuckles were bloody, but the fiend kept grinning down at him.

From atop the cart Freyja yelled. "Call on your god." Flapping with excitement, her hawk hopped down her arm to her hand.

Gunnar opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He could barely

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breathe. The monster forced the noose around Gunnar's pinned neck.

"Call on your god."

He could not even croak. The rope noose was strangling him.

Freyja threw her hawk at her husband's head, yelling for a third time, "Call on your god!"

The hawk landed screeching in Freyr's hair, knocking off his boar's tooth helmet, clawing for the tree-god's eyes. Hunks of bark and green hair fell in Gunnar's face. Freyr let go of the rope, loosening his hold, grabbing at the hawk.

Gunnar seized a limb with both his bleeding hands, yelling, "Lord Jesus help me!"

Freyr felt instantly lighter. Leaping up, pushing the god off him, Gunnar called on Christ again. The tree-god staggered back, with Gunnar hanging on one limb. "Christ help me!" said Gunnar a third time, and the limb he was holding snapped.

The torn idol twisted about, swinging his remaining limb and roaring in anguish. Then he bounded off into the storm, with the hawk still tearing at his hair.

Leaning on the broken limb, trying to keep weight off his bruised foot, Gunnar gasped for breath. Freyja descended from the wagon. "I told you it was a task easier done by a Christian."

Gunnar said nothing, needing his half-crushed throat for breathing. He stood swaying, his chest heaving, knuckles torn raw by Freyr's bark, the rope hanging from his neck. Freyja placed the boar's tooth helmet on his head. She took the noose from around his neck, then knelt down and belted the rope and seal-skin about his waist.

Gunnar got his throat working. "What are you doing, woman?"

She helped him onto the cart. "Ride here. When we get to the market village, you will enter as a god."

"This is silly," said Gunnar, too tired to step down. "I hurt in a dozen places and do not feel in the least godlike. How can I be a god when I am not even a heathen?" He did not know the Swedish penalty for impersonating a god, nor for pruning sacred idols without permission. Was it burning, flaying, or something *really* nasty?

"I am Freyja," she said, "Goddess-on-Earth. My husband *has* to be a god. The simplest child knows that."

Husband? Gunnar thought this over as her hawk fluttered back to land on her shoulder. She nuzzled the bird, then looked Gunnar over. "Please remember in the festival hall that gods stand tall. They do not slouch about, or pick their noses, or pass wind and belch to show satisfaction at the table." She took the reins of the black mare.

"I hardly speak Swedish."

"Fine," she said over her shoulder, "we prefer our gods aloof, not trou-

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bling us with wise words and bothersome commandments." Her glance turned wild and wanton. "We think it enough if our gods enjoy themselves."

The wagon jolted forward, skidding on the snow and slick stones. Gunnar gripped the rail and leaned on his tree limb. Seeing him riding in the god's place, the Swedes were certain to laugh, or at least tear him to pieces.

Deathly silence greeted them in the market village. Gunnar's cart lurched past people and thatched cottages, up to a high hall with its ridgepole shaped like the prow of a ship. Carved troll's faces peered at him from under the low eaves. The shamefaced priests appeared, throwing open the doors to the hall, dragging the wagon inside. Standing high on the cart, Gunnar saw rafters black with woodsmoke. Swedes crowded into the hall, those in the back standing on benches and tables along the wall, watching Gunnar and Freyja in uncanny silence.

Too scared to quiver, Gunnar was sure his only salvation was to stay as still as an image. The priests pulled them up an earthen ramp to the high table at the back of the hall.

As long as he could, Gunnar stood erect. The Swedes heaped a platter with meat and turnips; the priests placed it before him. When he could no longer support himself, he sank down onto the small alderwood stool at the front of the wagon.

The Swedes all drew breath at once. Freyja seated herself at his side.

In the hush, Gunnar could smell the steaming pigs' trotters and half-burnt roast. Food was everywhere, but no one ate. If he was to be chopped and burnt himself, he might as well make the best of it. Selecting a rich joint, he stripped off a meaty mouthful with his fingers.

The Swedes cheered. Then they sat down at their own tables and began to eat. Amazed, Gunnar lifted his tankard to wash down the meat. That brought on more cheers, and general drinking.

How strange to have his body functions provoke adulation! Gunnar guessed that if he dropped his breeches and pissed on his platter, the Swedes would have stood for a frenzied ovation, then urinated in unison. He did not put that notion to the test.

A memorable feast followed. Gunnar had never seen men and women drink like porpoises without a combat or a killing, since the presence of women always provoked men to brag in their cups and paw each other's wives. And yet the Swedes acted as if it were the most natural thing in the world for the sexes to sit together without mayhem or bad feeling. Gunnar studied the female diners. They were tall, handsome women, with proud lips and long limbs—utterly wasted on Swedish men. He was surprised to find them returning his stares with frank interest and imagination, as though they were picturing their new god in the nude.

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Gunnar kept comparing them to Freyja. Marriage was a serious thing. A Goddess-on-Earth would be used to having her way, and would by no means make a docile wife. She sat at ease beside him at the high table, laughing freely, head held high by her swan-white neck. He mortally wanted her—more than any other woman before—but could he *give up* every other woman for her?

Graybeards and village matrons laid gifts at his feet: honeycombs, fox furs, fleeces, sea ivory, and the like. The pile grew so sizable that Gunnar hardly noticed new additions. Then the priests thrust forward their gift, and the hall fell silent. It was Gerd. She looked as shy and fearful as when he had first seen her. Gunnar turned uncertainly to Freyja.

"This is Gerd," she said, "offered for your enjoyment." She said it stiffly, as if the words were from a ritual.

Gunnar looked back at Gerd, who seemed now quite pretty, scrubbed and brushed, with burnished gold circling her arms and fingers. "Thank you for the offering," he said in halting Swedish, "but this is not the woman I want."

The Swedes cheered, and Gerd seemed overjoyed, smiling wide at him. Gunnar sat back, feeling deflated. In his days as a mere man, young women had not been so happy to be passed over by him.

Freyja leaned close, asking if the pork was sitting poorly, or if his ale was sour. "No," he whispered, "the pork and ale are doing well. I just thought that the girl liked me. She could at least have looked a little downhearted."

Freyja smiled, "Do not feel so bad. This is the Feast of the Dead, when Freyr sent messengers to the Underworld. If we had no suitable stranger for him to sacrifice, Freyr demanded that the men bring him a young girl instead. All these girls were renamed Gerd. When Freyr was done with his Gerd, he strangled her, using the rope and seal-skin, then tossed her body in the bog. Naturally enough no girl is eager to mate with my husband."

Gunnar yelped and leaped up, ripping off the rope as though it were a viper, tossing cord and bag straight into the cooking fire. The Swedes looked stunned, then leaped to their feet, beating out an ovation that shook the smoky ridgepole.

Shaking, Gunnar sat down, demanding, "Why did you not tell me sooner what the rope and bag were for?"

"I wanted everyone to *see* you tear it off. A goddess must think of what will please her people, even ahead of what will make her happy."

Glumly, Gunnar watched the evening progress, until the last Swedes had staggered home or collapsed senseless on the straw. He turned to Freyja. "There is not much that I like about being a god. I cannot get

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roaring drunk, nor eat until I slump beneath the table, and even young girls are wary of me. All the manly pleasures are missing."

She stood up and took his hand, whispering, "All but one." Freyja took two cups of dark honey wine and led him to the curtained marriage bed. Gunnar was only moderately happy to follow her. She'd never asked him if he *wanted* to be married, to foreswear all women for her. She'd just arranged things to suit herself. How like a goddess! Gunnar could not decide if, as a Christian, he really *was* married. But then, if he were not married to Freyja, he was not a god—and the Swedes might take that amiss.

In the blackness behind the curtains, her hands slipped inside his tunic, stroking, pulling, and imploring. Soon he was contentedly plowing away atop her, not caring that he could hear his worshipers snoring outside. Sweden could have been worse.

Spring comes late to the mountains. As the world warmed, Freyja's belly began to swell. Gunnar was pleased that his winter's plowing was bearing fruit, but between her growing belly and the shortening nights, he had fewer chances to improve on previous work. Then, at spring sowing, a white procession approached the mound house. This time the procession was made up of real women, not men pretending to be priestesses. They did not mince nor chant, but stood in a smiling row with flowers in their hair, giving Gunnar those frank looks from under their lashes. He asked Freyja what they were here for.

"These are the unmarried women of the district," she said, "here for the god's spring blessing."

"Being a god is bad enough," said Gunnar, "but how could I give a heathen blessing? The words would lodge crossways in my throat!"

"Oh, they are not here for words. A god that eats and drinks is nothing compared to one that fathers children." She stroked her round belly. "Now they have a god that gives life instead of taking it. *That* is the blessing they wish to sample."

After a full winter among the wild Swedes, Gunnar was still astonished. "Would *you* be happy if I did that?"

"A goddess thinks first of her people's happiness. What would please these women is plain; . . . but you are a Christian. Can a Christian do what these women want done?"

Gunnar looked at the scrubbed, beaming faces. Yusa was not among them, but there was a stout blonde who might have been her big sister. With knit brows, he turned to his wife. "It is hard to know," he said, "what the Lord Jesus would do, were he put in my place . . . "

With the corner of his one good eye, Gunnar studied the line of young women, his smile returning. "All I *do* know is that King Olaf Tryggvason made me a Christian—but he never made me a fool!" ●

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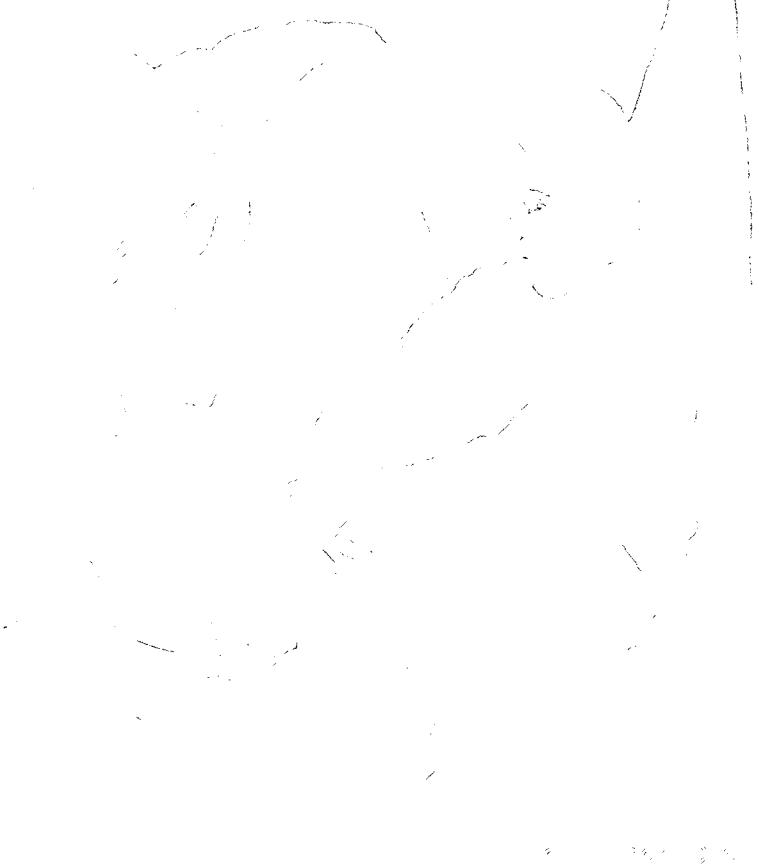
DUPLICITY

by Karen Joy Fowler

In the eerie uncharted reaches of South America, a chilling "Duplicity" is brutally revealed . . .



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They took Alice out every single day. Sometimes she was crying when she came back. Sometimes she was limp and had to be carried. This was not much like Alice.

Alice had been Alice the day she and Tilly returned to the base camp and found it violated. The tent had been ransacked. The camp lantern had been taken and some of their more brightly colored clothes were gone. A box of tampons had been opened and several unwrapped. Alice picked one up, holding it by its long tail like a dead mouse. She laughed. "What do you suppose they made of these?" she asked Tilly. She stuck the tampon into one of her ears, plugging the other ear with her finger. "Very useful," she said. "Yes? Sleep late in the mornings. Miss the birds."

Alice's cheerfulness was so marked it required explanation. Alice, who was an artist and amateur cartographer, had told Tilly that the blank spaces in maps were often referred to as *sleeping beauties*. This surprised Tilly, who had never given it any thought. She could not imagine anyone actually functioning with this optimistic attitude toward the unknown. Not without a lot of effort. Here be dragons, was Tilly's philosophy. Expect the worst and you'll still be disappointed. Her reaction to the intrusion into their camp had been one of barely controlled alarm. She had known this trip would be dangerous. They had come so casually. They had been very stupid.

But Alice had been Alice. "It was clearly investigative," she told Tilly calmly. "And not malicious. Nothing was broken. If they had wanted us to go, they would have found an unambiguous way to suggest it. This was just curiosity. Though I do wish they hadn't taken our light." Alice had been sitting outside the tent in the sun since she could no longer work at night. Propped open on her knees, she'd had a lap desk which folded and unfolded; she'd been penciling a curve in the Nhamunda River onto her graph.

The map Alice and Tilly had brought was based on high-altitude infrared pictures. The maps Alice was doing would be much more detailed. On that day she had been working on something whimsical, partly map, partly picture. She had noted the turn in the river and then, in the water, had added the head of a large river turtle—the *tracaja*. On the day of their arrival, a turtle like this had watched them for hours while they emptied the boat and set up camp. Alice had sung the turtle song from Sesame Street to it, bringing civilization, she said, to the backwards turtles of Brazil who could have no knowledge of the advances other turtles had made globally. Alice had nieces and nephews and a predilection for information there was no reasonable way she could know anyhow. Tilly didn't know that song.

Two untidy brown braids rested on Alice's shoulders. A slight breeze blew the unrestrained wisps of hair into her face. She held them back

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with her left hand, added an arrow to the map with her right. "You are here," she'd said to Tilly. Brightly.

You are here.

The sun was up. Dim green light filtered through the walls of the tent which smelled of sleeping bags and hiking boots and moisture. They opened the flaps every day but the tent never lost its hothouse feel. Tilly woke this morning missing Steven. Not memories, she wasn't *thinking*. The surface of her body missed him. Her skin. Where's Steven, it asked. Where's his mouth. Where're his hands. She substituted her own hands, but her body knew the difference. And there was another difference, which she recognized, that she would do this in front of Alice now. As if Alice had become part of her like an arm, like Tilly's left arm, less intimate than the right, but part of her all the same.

Although really she believed Alice was still asleep. Sleep was the only escape for Alice now. Tilly would have felt very guilty if she woke Alice from it early. She listened to Alice breathe and tried to guess if Alice were awake or not. Alice moved so seldom; her body was landscape.

Tilly would have liked to get up, but this would have woken Alice for sure and, anyway, the tent was clogged with the sleeping mats and bags, with the unused stove, with Tilly's camera cases, and with Alice's maps. Tilly could only stand up straight in the very middle of the tent. She had bouts of claustrophobia. Everything Tilly knew, everything Tilly could imagine, was either inside or outside this tent. The two sets were infinitely inclusive. The two sets were mutually exclusive. Except for Alice. Alice could belong to both.

The size of the tent had never bothered her before, when she could come and go as she pleased. In actual fact the tent was probably no smaller than the bedroom she had had as a child and it had never seemed small to her either, although you couldn't even open the bedroom door completely; the chest of drawers was behind it. The bedroom was a safe place, a place where you were cared for and protected. You could depend on this so confidently you didn't even notice it. As Tilly grew older she began to see the shapes and shadows of another world. A girl in the sixth grade at Tilly's school was followed home by a man in a white car. Tilly was told at the dinner table that she mustn't talk to strangers. Angela Ruiz, who lived next door, had heard from her cousin in Chicago how some boy she knew was beaten with a pair of pliers by his own father while his mother watched. In *Life* magazine Tilly saw a picture of a little boy and his two sisters, but there was something wrong about the way they looked, and the article said that their mother hadn't wanted anyone to know she had children so she'd hidden them in the basement for five years. Without sunshine, without exercise, their growth had been

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stunted. They were bonsai children. In the last week their vaguely misshapen bodies returned to Tilly's dreams.

In Obidos, where children at twelve play soccer and have sex, the man who sold them supplies had told them a story. A cautionary tale—Tilly could see this in retrospect. It involved the fresh water dolphin called the *boto*. The boto could take a woman, penetrating her in the water or in human male form on shore, or even in her dreams. She would grow pale and die in childbirth, if she lasted that long, and her child would be deformed—having the smooth face of the father, his rubber skin, a blow hole on the top of the head where the fontanel should be.

Tilly had moved her pad so that it was, in relation to the door, in the same spot as her bed was in her bedroom. Alice never mentioned it, though she'd had to move Alice's pad, too. Alice was gone at the time. They took Alice out every single day. It was hard not to envy Alice for this no matter how she looked when she came back.

An unseen bird, a trogon, began to shriek nearby. The sound rose above the other rain forest noises in the same way a police siren always buried the sounds of normal traffic. Shhhh. The door was a curtain of nylon which whispered when the wind blew. The faint smell of mimosa, just discernible over the smell of sleep and sweat and last night's urine, passed through the tent and was gone. Alice's pad was as far away from the door as it could be. Tilly propped herself on one elbow to look at Alice, who was staring up at the ceiling. "Alice," Tilly said. Any word you spoke in this little room was spoken too loudly. Shhhh, said the door.

"I'm still here," said Alice. "Did you think I might not be?" She moved and caught herself painfully in mid-movement. Her hair was snarled in the back. She had stopped braiding it weeks ago when her last rubber band had snapped. "My back is sore," she said. "I ache all over." She looked directly at Tilly. "I thought of another one. The boy in the bubble."

This was a game Alice had made up to pass the time. She and Tilly were making a list of famous prisoners. The longer the game went on the more flexible the category became. Tilly wanted to count Howard Hughes. You could be self-imprisoned, Tilly argued. But Alice said no, you weren't a prisoner if there wasn't a jailor and the jailor had to be someone or some *thing* on the outside. Outside the tent something shifted and coughed.

When the camp was violated, Alice and Tilly had assumed the trespassers were Indians, although it had surprised them. What else would they think? A number of the local tribes would be considered low contact, if hardly untouched. There were the Hixkaryana, the Kaxuiana, the Tirio. They had shotguns and motorboats. They had been to the cities. If you mentioned Michael Jackson to them they would nod to let you know you were not the first. The man who advised them on supplies in

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Obidos had been from the Tirio tribe. His advice, though lengthy, had been essentially indifferent; the spectacle of two women on holiday in the rain forest had aroused less comment than they expected. He had made one ominous observation in Portuguese. "It is quite possible," he had said, "to go into the forest as a young woman and come out very old."

Alice and Tilly should have gone to FUNAI for permission to visit the Indians, who were protected by the Brazilian government from curious tourists. But Alice was only interested in the terrain. She had hardly given the Indians a thought when she planned the trip. Steven had asked about them, but then Steven asked about everything. He was in New York City riding the subways and worrying about Tilly out here with the savages. Steven had been mugged twice last year.

Tilly had insisted on moving the camp after the intrusion, back from the river, but not too far since they still needed water and Alice was still taking measurements. It was a lot of work for nothing. Tilly was setting up the tent again when she realized she was being watched.

From a distance they still looked like Indians. Tilly saw shadows of their shapes between the trees. They paced her when she went to the river for water. She wondered how she'd ever be able to bathe again, knowing or not knowing they were there. She wouldn't even brush her teeth. She went back to camp and argued with Alice about setting a watch at night. By then it was afternoon. Alice had made lunch. "We can decide that later," she said. "There will be plenty of time to decide that later." But later they came right into the camp and they didn't look like Indians at all. Their heads were hairless and flattened uniformly in the back. The features on their faces were human enough to be recognizable; two eyes deep set into pockets of puffy skin and two nostrils flush with the rest of the face, expanding and contracting slightly when they breathed. Their mouths were large and mobile. They had a human mix of carnivorous and herbivorous teeth. If Tilly had only seen one she might have thought it a mutation of some sort, or the result of disease or accident. In books she had seen pictures of humans deformed to a similar degree. But these were all the same. They were aliens. She told Alice so.

Alice was not so sure. There was nothing off-world about their clothing, drapes of an undyed loose weave, covering the same parts of the body that humans felt compelled to conceal. She pointed to the tampons which dangled by their strings from cloth belts. "They've taken trophies," said Alice. "They've got our scalps. Doesn't that strike you as rather primitive for a race with interstellar capabilities?" Alice *invited* them into the tent. Tilly did not follow. Tilly had the sense to be terrified. She was ready to run, had a clear path to the river, hardly stopped to notice that flight would have meant abandoning Alice. But there were more and more of

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them. She never had the chance. On the way into the tent one veered toward Tilly. She ducked away, but the arm was longer than she expected; the hand landed on her shoulder. There was an extra flexibility in the fingers, an additional joint, but Tilly didn't notice it then. The hand was cooler than her own skin. She could feel it through her cotton shirt and it pulsed, or else that was her own heartbeat she felt. She was so frightened she fainted. It was a decision she made; she remembered this later. A blackening void behind her eyes and her own voice warning her that she was going to faint. Shall we stop? the voice asked, and Tilly said no, no, let's do it, let's get out of here.

The clasps of the tent door clicked together like rosary beads as it was brushed to one side. Breakfast had arrived. The dishes were from Tilly and Alice's own kits. Tilly's was handed to her. Alice's was set on the floor by the door. One of them stayed to watch as Alice and Tilly ate.

Tilly's plate had a tiny orange on it, porridge made of their own farinha and a small, cooked fish. There were crackers from their own stores. Alice was given only the crackers and less of them. From the very first there had been this difference in their treatment. Of course, Tilly shared her food with Alice. Tilly had to move onto Alice's pad to do this; Alice would never come to Tilly. She made Tilly beg her to eat some of Tilly's breakfast, because there was never enough food for two people. "What kind of fish do you think this is?" Tilly asked Alice, taking a bite of it and making Alice take a bite.

"It's a dead fish," Alice answered. Her voice was stone.

Tilly was very hungry afterwards. Alice was hungry, too, had to be, but she didn't say so. "Thank you, Tilly," Alice would say. And then two more would come and the three of them would take Alice.

Tilly was always afraid they would not bring her back. It was a selfish thing to feel, but Tilly could not help it. Tilly cared about Alice and Alice should belong to the set of things inside the tent. Everything else Tilly cared about did not. Like Steven. She missed Steven. He was so nice. That's what everyone said about Steven. Alice was always pointing this out to Tilly. The thing about Steven, Alice was always saying, was that he was just so nice. Alice didn't quite believe in him. "And women don't want nice men anyway," said Alice. "Let's be honest."

"I do," said Tilly.

"Then why aren't you married to Steven?" Alice asked. "Why are you here in the rain forest instead of home married to your nice man? Because there's no adventure with Steven. No intensity. The great thing about men, the really appealing thing, is that you can't believe a word they say. They fascinate. They compel." Alice knew a variety of men. Some of them had appeared to be nice men initially. Alice always found them out, though. Occasionally they turned out to be married men. "I don't

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know why so many women complain that they can't find men willing to commit," Alice said. "Mine are always overcommitted."

Steven must be just starting to wonder if everything was all right. A small worry at first, but it would grow. No sight of them in Obidos, he would hear. Where they were expected four weeks ago. Perhaps the boat would be found, covered by then in the same purple flowered vines which choked the rest of the riverbank. Would Steven come himself to look for her? Steven had taken her to the plane and at just the last minute, with his arms around her, he had asked her not to go. Tilly could feel his arms around her arms if she tried very hard. He could have asked earlier. He could have held her more tightly. He had been so nice about the trip. Tilly thought of him all day long and it made her lonely. She never dreamed of him at night, though; her dreams had shadows with elongated arms and subtly distorted shapes. Steven had no place in that world. And even without him, even with the dreams, night was better.

A storm of huge green dragonflies battered themselves against the walls of the tent, but they couldn't get in. It sounded like rain. All around her, outside, her jailors grunted as they drove the insects away with their hands. They were in the front of the tent and they were behind the tent; there would be no more escape attempts. Alice was no longer even planning any. Alice was no longer planning anything. To convince herself that Alice would be coming back, Tilly played Alice's game. She sat still with her legs crossed, combing out her hair with her fingers, and tried to think of another prisoner for their list. Her last suggestion had come from a story she suddenly remembered her father telling her. It was about a mathematician who'd been sentenced to death for a crime she didn't recall. On the night before his execution he'd tried to write several proofs out, but very quickly. The proofs were hard to read and sometimes incomplete. Generations of mathematicians had struggled with them—some of those problems were still unsolved. Tilly's father had been a mathematician. Steven was an industrial artist.

Alice had told Tilly she had the story wrong. "He wasn't a prisoner and he wasn't sentenced to death," Alice said. "He was going to fight a duel and he was very myopic so he knew he'd lose." She wouldn't count Tilly's mathematician. The last prisoner of Tilly's Alice had been willing to count was Mary, Queen of Scots. This was way back when they were first detained. Tilly was just the tiniest bit irritated by this.

The river drummed, birds cried, and far away Tilly heard the roaring of the male howler monkeys, like rushing water or wind at this distance. Bugs rattled and clicked. Each ordinary sound was a betrayal. How quickly the forest accepted an alien presence. It was like plunging a knife into water; the water reformed instantly about the blade, the break was an illusion. Of course, the forest had responded to Tilly and Alice

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in much the same way. And now they were natives, local fauna to an expedition from the stars. Or so Tilly guessed. "Our only revenge," she had told Alice, "is that they're bound to think we're indigenous. We're going to wreak havoc with their data. Centuries from now a full-scale invasion will fail because all calculations will have been based on this tiny error."

Alice had offered two alternative theories. Like Tilly's, they were straight from the tabloids. The first was that their captors were the descendants of space aliens. Marooned in the forest here they had devolved into their current primitive state. The second was that Tilly and Alice had stumbled into some Darwinian detour on the evolutionary ladder. Something about this particular environment favored imbedded eyes and corkscrew fingers. It was a closed gene pool. "And let's keep it closed," Alice had added. She smiled and shook her head at Tilly. Her braids flew. "South American Headshrinking Space Aliens Forced Me to Have Elvis's Baby," Alice said.

At first Alice had kept diary entries of their captivity. She did a series of sketches, being very careful with the proportions. She told Tilly to take pictures but Tilly was afraid, so Alice took them herself with Tilly's cameras. The film sat curled tightly in small, dark tubes, waiting to make Alice and Tilly's fortunes when they escaped or were let go or were rescued. Alice had tallied the days in the tent on her graphs and talked as if they would be released soon. There was no way to guess how soon because there was no way to guess why they were being held. Alice fantasized ways to escape. Tilly would have liked to ink the days off on the wall of the tent; this would have been so much more in the classical tradition. Four straight lines and then a slash. A hieroglyphic of the human hand. A celebration of the opposable thumb. Anne Boleyn had six fingers. Tilly wondered how she had marked the walls of her cell.

The door clicked to the side. Tilly sat up with a start. One of them was entering, bent over, her dish in its hands. It was one of the three who had taken Alice. There was no mistaking it, because it wore Tilly's green sweater, the two arms tied around its neck in a mock embrace, the body of the sweater draped on its back. The face belonged to a matinee horror monster—maybe the Phantom of the Opera. From the neck to the waist, largely because of her sweater, it could have been any freshman at any Eastern university. From the waist down Tilly saw the rest of the sacklike gown, bare legs, bare feet. Monklike, only the legs were hairless. On the dish was a duplication of Tilly's breakfast. She stared at it, hardly able to believe in it. She had never been offered additional food before. The door rattled again as she was left alone. She took a tiny bit of the fish in her fingers. She looked at it. She put it in her mouth. She took another bite. And then another. The food was here, after all. Why shouldn't she

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eat it just because Alice was hungry? How would it help Alice not to eat this food? Alice would *want* her to eat it. She ate faster and faster, licking her fingers. She ate the rind and seeds of the orange. She scraped the fish bones under her sleeping pad.

Alice was pale and tearful when she came back. She lay down and her breath was a ragged series of quick inhalations. There were no marks on her. There never were. Just an agony about her face. "What did they do to you?" Tilly asked her and Alice closed her eyes. "I mean, was it different today?" Tilly said. She sat beside Alice and stroked her hair until Alice's breathing had normalized.

Alice had her own question. "Why are they doing this?" Alice asked. Or she didn't ask it. The question was still there. "They don't try to talk to me. They don't ask me anything. I don't know what they want. They just hurt me. They're monsters," said Alice.

And then there was a silence for the other questions they asked only deep inside themselves. Why to me and not to you? Why to you and not to me?

When dinner came that night there was nothing but crackers for both of them. Alice was given more than Tilly. This had never happened before. "Look at that," she said with the first lilt Tilly had heard in her voice in a long time. "Why do you suppose they are doing that?" She equalized the portions. "They will see that we always share," she told Tilly. "No matter what they do to us."

"I don't want any," Tilly said. "Really. After what they did to you today I'm sure you need food more than I do. Please. You eat it."

It made Alice angry. "You've always shared with me," Alice insisted. "Always. We share." She directed these last words toward the one who stayed to watch them eat. Tilly took the crackers. The sun went down. The birds quieted and the bugs grew louder. Tree frogs sang, incessantly alto. The world outside maintained a dreadful balance. Inside, the tent walls darkened and they were left alone. Alice lay still. Tilly undressed completely. She climbed into her bag which smelled of mildew and missed Steven.

She had to urinate during the night. She waited and waited until she couldn't wait anymore, afraid she would wake Alice. Finally she slid out of her bag and crawled to the empty bucket which sat by the tent door. She tried to tilt the bucket so that the urine would make less noise hitting the bottom, but every sound she made was too loud in this little room. Of course Alice would hear her and wonder. Alice rarely used the bucket at all now. Tilly wished she could empty the bucket before Alice saw it. She got back into her sleeping bag and missed Steven until she finally fell asleep, sometime in the morning.

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When she woke up she missed him again. Alice's eyes were open. "That teacher who killed that doctor," Tilly said. "The diet doctor."

"Jean Harris," said Alice. "I already said her."

"No, you didn't," said Tilly.

"I don't want to play anymore. It was a stupid game and it just upsets me. Why can't you forget it?" Of course the mornings were always tense for Alice. The day's ordeal was still ahead of her. Tilly tried not to mind anything Alice said in the mornings. But the truth was that Alice was often rather rude. Maybe that was why she was treated like she was. Tilly was not rude and nobody treated Tilly like they treated Alice.

"I have another one," said Tilly. There was already a film of sweat on her forehead; the day was going to be hot. She climbed out of her sleeping bag and lay on top of it, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "And you certainly haven't said her. I can't remember her name, but she lived in Wales in the 1800s and she was famous for fasting. She lived for two years without eating food and without drinking water and people said it was a miracle and came to be blessed and brought her family offerings."

Alice said nothing.

"She was a little girl," Tilly said. "She never left her bed. Not for two years." Alice looked away from her.

"There was a storm of medical controversy. A group of doctors finally insisted that no one could live for two years without food and water. They demanded a round-the-clock vigil. They hired nurses to watch every move the little girl made. Do you know this story?"

Alice was silent. "The little girl began to starve. It was obvious that she had been eating secretly all along. I mean, of course, she had been eating. The doctors all knew this. They begged her to eat now. But they wouldn't go away and let her do it in secret. They were not really very nice men. She refused food. She and her parents refused to admit that it had all been a hoax. The little girl starved to death because no one would admit it had all been a hoax," said Tilly. "What was she a prisoner of? Ask me. Ask me who her jailors were."

Shhh, said the door.

"You must be very hungry," said Alice. "Diet doctors and fasting girls. I'm hungry, too. I wish you'd shut up." It wasn't a very nice thing for Alice to say.

Alice was given crackers for breakfast. Tilly had a Cayenne banana and their own dried jerky and some kind of fruit juice. Tilly sat beside Alice and made Alice take a bite every time Tilly took a bite. Alice didn't even thank her. When they finished breakfast, two more of them came and took Alice.

They brought Tilly coffee. There was sugar and limes and tinned sardines. There was a kind of bread Tilly didn't recognize. The loaf was

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shaped in a series of concentric circles from which the outer layers could be torn one at a time until the loaf was reduced to a single simple circle. It was very beautiful. Tilly was angry at Alice so she ate it all and while she was eating it, she realized for the first time that they loved her. That was why they brought her coffee, baked bread for her. But they didn't love Alice. Was this Tilly's fault? Could Tilly be blamed for this?

Tilly was not even hungry enough to eat the seeds of the limes. She lifted her pad to hide them with the fish bones. Many of the tiny bones were still attached to the fish's spine, even after Tilly had slept on them all night. It made her think of fairy tales, magic fish bones, and princesses who slept on secrets and princes who were nice men or maybe they weren't, you really never got to know them *at home*. She could imagine the fish alive and swimming, one of those transparent fish with their feathered backbones and their trembling green hearts. No one should know you that well; no one should see inside you like that, Tilly thought. That was Alice's mistake, wearing her heart outside like she did. Telling everybody what she thought of everything. And she was getting worse. Of course she didn't speak anymore, but it was easier and easier to tell what she was thinking. She had a lot of resentment for Tilly. Tilly couldn't be blind to this. And for what? What had Tilly ever done? This whole holiday had been Alice's idea, not Tilly's. It was all part of Alice's plan to separate Tilly from Steven.

Tilly got out Alice's papers, looking to see if she'd written anything about Tilly in them. But Alice hadn't written anything for a couple of weeks. P.D., the last entry ended. P.D. Tilly traced it with her index finger. What did that mean?

When Alice came back Tilly was shocked by the change in her. She was carried in and left, lying on her back on Tilly's mat which was closest to the door, and she didn't move. She hardly looked like Alice anymore. She was fragile and edgeless as if she had been rubbed with sandpaper. The old Alice was all edges. The new Alice was all bone. Her bones were more and more evident. It was a great mistake to show yourself so. "What does P.D. mean?" Tilly asked her.

"Get me some water," Alice whispered.

They kept a bucket full by the door next to the empty bucket which functioned as the toilet. A bug was floating in the drinking water, a large white moth with faint circles painted on its furry wings. If Tilly had seen it fall she would have rescued it. She doubted that Alice would have bothered. Alice was so different now. Alice would have enjoyed seeing the moth drown. Alice wanted everyone to be as miserable as she was. It was the only happiness Alice had. Tilly scooped the dead moth into the cup of water for Alice, to make Alice happy. She held the cup just out of Alice's reach. "First tell me what it means," she said.

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Alice lay with her head tilted back. The words moved up and down the length of her throat. Her voice was very tired and soft. Shhh, said the door. "It's a cartographer's notation." Her eyes were almost closed. In the small space between the lids, Tilly could just see her eyes. Alice was watching the water. "It means *position doubtful.*" Tilly helped her sit up, held the cup so she could drink. Alice lay back on the mat. "Prospects doubtful," said Alice. "Presumed dead," said Alice.

Outside Tilly heard the howler monkeys, closer today. She could almost distinguish one voice from the rest, a dominant pitch, a different rhythm. She had once stood close enough to a tribe of howler monkeys to connect each mouth with its own deafening noise. This was at the zoo in San Diego. In San Diego, Tilly had been the one on the outside.

It was so like Alice to just give up, thought Tilly. Not like Alice before, but certainly like Alice now. Alice now was completely different from Alice before. Living together like this had shown her what Alice was *really* like. This was probably what the South American Headshrinking Space Alien Children of the Boto had wanted all along, to see what people were really like.

Well, what did they know now? On the one hand, they had Alice. Alice was completely exposed. No wonder they didn't love Alice.

But on the other hand, they had Tilly. And there was no need to change Tilly.

They loved Tilly. ●

PLANT A FEATHER, GROW A BIRD

Four years old, sandy beach.
The sun is hot today.
She plants a feather in the sand.
"What are you doing?" I ask, drifting on the sun,
the water.
"Growing a bird," she says. How young she is.
Suddenly we are both four years old
and I want to believe too.

—Jack C. Haldeman II

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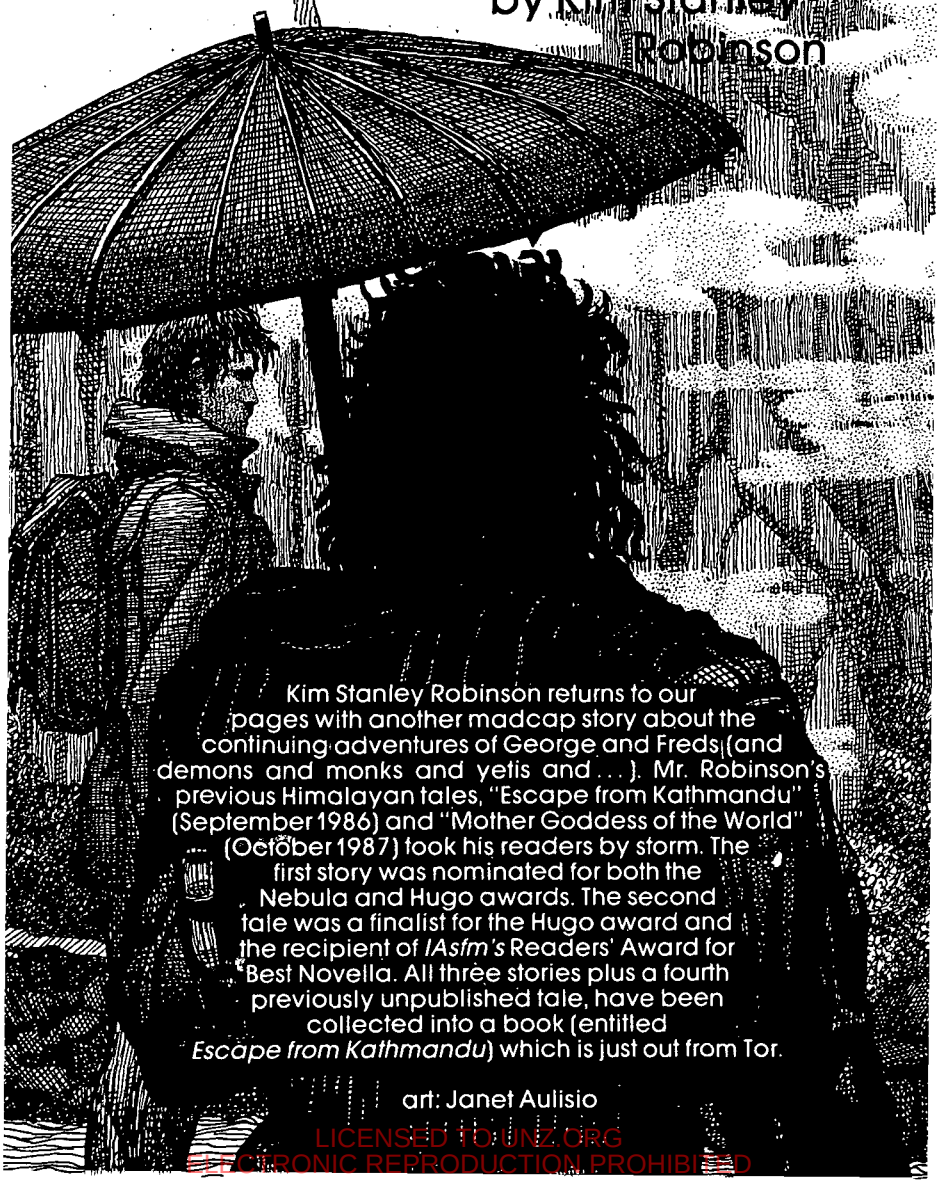
THE TRUE NATURE OF SHANGRI-LA

by Kim Stanley Robinson



Kim Stanley Robinson returns to our pages with another madcap story about the continuing adventures of George and Freds (and demons and monks and yetis and . . .). Mr. Robinson's previous Himalayan tales, "Escape from Kathmandu" (September 1986) and "Mother Goddess of the World" (October 1987) took his readers by storm. The first story was nominated for both the Nebula and Hugo awards. The second tale was a finalist for the Hugo award and the recipient of *IAsfm's* Readers' Award for Best Novella. All three stories plus a fourth previously unpublished tale, have been collected into a book (entitled *Escape from Kathmandu*) which is just out from Tor.

art: Janet Aulisio

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They say in Nepal that an early monsoon brings good luck but obviously they are lying through their teeth. The only thing an early monsoon brings if you ask me is more rain than usual in the late spring and early summer. Take for instance 1986, when the monsoon struck in May. Big trouble that year, for a place you probably know as Shangri-La. Now the name Shangri-La is not the valley's real name, that's just what it was called in a movie and they must have heard wrong because the real name is Shambhala. Shambhala is the hidden city of Tibet, the home of the world's most ancient wisdom, the sacred secret stronghold of Tibetan Buddhism. The source of all the world's religions, in fact. I have spent a good bit of time there myself with my teacher Kunga Norbu Rimpoche and so when Kunga came down to Kathmandu to tell me Shambhala was in trouble, I knew it was my duty to help in any way I could.

Apparently word had gotten around that the Nepalis were planning to extend one of their hill roads up to a mountain village that was so close to Shambhala that it represented a serious danger. The road would bring so many people into the area that the secret would eventually get out, and that would be it for the sacred valley.

As soon as Kunga Norbu explained the nature of the problem I knew that my buddy George Fergusson was the answer. George is great at oiling his way through the Nepali bureaucracy to get what he needs for his trekking business, so I figured he had expertise in just the areas we needed.

But when I left Kunga Norbu at the Tibetan camp in Patan and went back to the Hotel Star to approach George about it, he was reluctant. "No way," he said. "Not a chance. You and your guru buddy already nearly killed me."

"Aw come on," says I. "It's just a little road project we need stopped."

"No way, Freds! I have to hassle with the bureaucrats here all the time, why would I deliberately expose myself to more?"

"That's just it, George. We need an expert. And listen, there's more to it than I can tell you. You know, mystical reasons."

George frowned and said "Now don't you go trying to twilight zone me again, Freds," meaning I wasn't to step outside the two and a half foot radius of his Betty Crocker worldview. But he had already been dragged outside that circle once or twice before and once outside you can never get all the way back in again no matter how hard you try, which was why there was a little crease of worry growing between George's eyes as he wagged his finger at me.

"Come on," says I.

"No fucking way."

It turned out he was in a bad mood because of something he had read in *The International Herald Tribune*. There he was, kicked back in his

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lawn chair, soaking the morning rays on the sun deck located on the roof of the Hotel Star lobby, occasionally chatting with two Danish gals in bikinis, stoned and eating Nebico wafers and drinking a Budweiser and reading his week-old copy of the *Tribbie*, and it should have been Kathmandu In Monsoon Heaven but he was sitting there all dejected because of an article he had just read. He tore through the pages to show it to me. "See that? Can you believe it? A group from the University of Washington used a satellite and damned if they didn't find out that K2 is taller than Everest!"

"I would have thought that would be hard to judge from a satellite."

" 'K2 is now known to be 29,064 feet tall, while Everest's official height is still listed at 29,002 feet.' Can you believe it?" He was really aggrieved. "I mean all those expeditions to Everest, all the heroics and people getting killed, and all for the *second highest mountain*? It's too fucking ironic, man. It's *horrible*."

"Especially since you yourself are now amongst those deluded climbers who risked all for number two," says I.

"Don't say that so loud," he says, glancing around. "But sure I'm disappointed, I mean, aren't you?"

"We had to drag your ass up that mountain, George. You hated it."

"Of course I did, it was a stupid thing the way you guys did it, no support, no *plan*. But, you know—since we did do it, I mean that was the whole *point*. We bagged the biggie."

"We can always take you up K2."

No reply from George.

"In fact," says I, seeing an opening, "Kunga Norbu may just *have* to climb it to fulfill his obligation to Tilopa. And of course his companions would be mystically obliged to accompany him."

"Ha," George said, the crease between his eyes getting deeper.

"And you know one of Kunga's powers is getting people to do what he wants. Like when he convinced you to go for the peak of Chomolungma."

He frowned. "Just don't tell him about this recalculation thing."

"Of course I don't really have time to tell him about that, George. Being as how we've got this other matter we need your help on. Your help here in Kathmandu. Just making a few trips into the government offices, in your spare time. During the monsoon when you got nothing to do and are near dead with boredom anyway."

"All right, all right." He sighed. "So what's this big problem?"

"They're building a road to Chhule." I'm going to call the village that even though it is not the village's real name.

"So?"

"George," says I. "They're building a *road* into an unspoiled area of the Himal, where there's never been any road before!"

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"Ah," says he. "That is a drag. Chalk off one more good trekking area. But that's not a very popular route anyway, is it?"

That was George all over. Like a lot of Western climbing freaks in Nepal he saw the country as no more than the ultimate mountain playground, with plenty of hash and a lot of exotic quaint cheap local culture on the side. A place where for a couple thou a year you could live like cut-rate royalty providing you didn't mind disease and bad food. So he grooved in the sun and led his treks and climbed the mountains and paid no mind to the rest of it, and like the other longtime regulars he had gotten to a point where he hated the tourists because they were ignorant, and despised the locals because they were ignorant, until in fact there was nobody in Nepal doing it exactly right except him and his buddies, and as the saying goes, even they were suspect.

So he didn't understand at first. But he wasn't as bad as some, or so I believed. "Come on, George, let me take you to Marco Polo's for lunch, I need to tell you more about this in private. There's ramifications, like I told you."

So George put on his T-shirt and his Vuarnets and we went downstairs past the zoned-out clerks in the lobby. It was noonish, hot and muggy, the day's rains about to hit, and everyone in the hotel looked like they were in a trance except for the woman with the kid strapped to her back bent over out front halfway through her daily task of sweeping the courtyard with a hand whisk. Then we were out the hotel gates and past the Tantric Used Book Shop and into Thamel, the hotel quarter of Kathmandu. This area gets pretty dead in the monsoon, but that only meant the taxi drivers and carpet shop people and hash dealers and money changers and beggars were all more eager than ever to attract our business. "Hey, Mr. No!" they yelled at George, laughing at him as he hopped down the muddy strip between puddles doing his usual "No, no, no, no," routine to everyone he passed, no matter if they had accosted him or not. He was relaxed and breezy, having a good time, doing his turn and everyone digging it, your typical L.A. thrillseeker, about six two and built like a quarterback, dark-haired and good-looking in a Steve Garvey-gone-to-seed style, and so cool you could use him to kill warts, so cool in fact that all the street folk actually enjoyed his No No No routine, and all was well except for the fact that they were as low on rupees after George passed as before. I really should learn to do that myself but I haven't yet and so I usually walk the neighborhood with no rupees at all on me so I can't be giving them all away, but this time I had what it would take to buy George and me lunch, and who did we run into but one of the local beggars we saw all the time, a guy who cruised Thamel homeless with his little daughter in tow. They would stand there holding hands and the man would smile a gap-toothed smile and the little girl

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about six would do likewise and they would both hold out their free hands toward you, and they did tolerably well that way. Certainly I could never resist them, and in fact on this day, after George noed them, I gave them our lunch money, figuring that I would get George to bail me out and then it could be said that he had helped out the beggar and his little sidekick, whilst I had bought the lunch as I intended to.

George was unaware of my intentions, but when he looked back and noticed what I was doing he was still disgusted with me. "You only encourage them, Freds."

"Yeah, I know."

George had no sympathy whatsoever for that beggar or any other, or for any of the rest of the street operators for that matter. Like one time I remember after we had had a particularly bad time getting down the narrow main street he had looked back at the whole crowd of them, all staring at us, and he had flipped out. "They're just like bowling pins in a bowling alley, aren't they, Freds? Standing there they look like you could, hey, wait just a sec," and he had rushed into the German Pumpernickel Bakery and come back out with a big dark angelfood cake which did upon reflection indeed resemble a bowling ball in weight and general consistency, and he punched finger and thumb holes in it and took a long run and wind-up, and he bowled that cake right down the middle of them, laughing like a loon.

"You are risking reincarnation as something small and disgusting," I told him. But he didn't hear me.

This time, however, we got to lunch without incident.

"Look, George," I told him as we ate pizza in our little private window nook at Marco Polo's, "you know what happens when they put a road through one of the hill villages."

"People drive there."

"Exactly! People drive there, people drive away from there. The whole village goes to hell. Wiped out forever."

"Don't get too melodramatic, Freds."

"I'm not! You know Jiri?"

"Yeah." He wrinkled his nose.

"That was a beautiful village until the road was built to it."

He didn't believe me. "Freds, they study shit like that before they do it, they make sure it's gonna be okay."

Now this was such a stupid thing to say that I knew he didn't mean it. He was just putting me off. "Cockroach."

"Where?"

"That's what you're gonna come back as."

I stared out the window. Usually the view out the third story window

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of the Marco Polo is one I enjoy, the colorful carpets on display at street level, the balconies above covered by tick mattresses faintly steaming in the sun, above that prayer flags and telephone wires tangled in the air, on roofs so old that great lawns of weedy green and yellow grass grow out of them. And then the huge pines of the palace in the background, with maybe a glimpse of the Himal beyond. But on that day the monsoon clouds were lowering the boom, the carpets and mattresses had been hauled in and the buildings looked ramshackle in the dark rainy air. Back in the gloom of the restaurant's main room diners were steadfastly munching away trying to ignore the notion that they had been orwelled off to a world where all food tasted like cardboard, not just pizza dough but also tomato paste and cheese and vegetables, everything in fact except for the big twisty black Chinese mushrooms that writhed on the slices looking just like the bizarre fungoid growths they were and suggesting with every rank rubbery chew that a bad mistake in mycology had been made back at the canning factory.

It was not a cheery sight. And I had a stubborn wily lazy friend to deal with, and it was clear it was going to take a serious breach of security to get him to do what we wanted. "George," I said wearily, "can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

"This is important, George. This is like Nathan and Buddha, you know?"

"Okay," he said, looking offended. "Did I ever tell anyone about that?"

"I don't know. But you sure as hell can't tell anyone about this. See, there's a village just beyond the end of this road they're planning to build, in the next valley over. And this is no ordinary village. It's Kunga Norbu's village."

"I thought he was Tibetan."

"It's a Tibetan village."

"A Tibetan village in Nepal?"

"It's up there on the border, right on the crest where the border gets a little chancy. Up there in ———" which is one of them semi-independent little old kingdoms that are part of Nepal but stick into the body of Tibet, following curlicues in the crest of the Himalayan range.

George nodded. He knew that a lot of the highland Nepalis were Tibetan in origin, the Sherpas in the east, the Bhotians in the west ("Bhotian" meaning "Tibetan" in Nepalese), so that this situation wasn't that uncommon. "That's near where we let Buddha go," he said.

"That's right. It's a special area." I told him how wonderful it was, like the Khumbu only completely untouched, with Buddha and a lot of other yetis living in the high forest, and all kinds of other special properties,

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and he chewed and nodded and didn't look at all like he was going to do anything about it.

"So what's the secret?" he said.

He just wanted to know for the sake of knowing a secret, I could tell. But there is a big difference between knowledge that has been pressed on you and knowledge you have asked for, so I leaned over quick and said in a real low voice,

"The village is actually Shangri-La."

"Come on, Freds. That's a made-up name out of a movie. *Lost Horizon.*"

"Yeah, that's right. I didn't think you'd know that much about it. The real name is Shambhala. Whatever you call it, it's the same place."

"I thought Shambhala was in northern Tibet, or Mongolia."

"They've spread a lot of disinformation about it. But it's up on the border, and it's in big trouble because of this road they're planning to build."

George stared at me. "You're kidding, right?"

"Was I kidding you about Kunga Norbu being a tulku? Were Nathan and I kidding you about Buddha the Yeti?"

He chomped away for a while thinking about it. "I don't believe you."

"Why would I lie?"

"You wouldn't lie, Freds, but you could get fooled. I mean, how do you *know* it's Shambhala?"

"I've been there. I spent about six months there."

He stared at me again. "Freds, just how the hell did *you* come to spend six months in Shambhala?"

Now you may have wondered about this yourself, and to tell the truth so have I. How did Freds Fredericks, star linebacker for the Razorbacks and all-American vet school dropout, come to be a Tibetan Buddhist monk well acquainted with the sacred hidden valley of Shambhala?

I don't *really* know. Some of us have weird karmas to work through in this life, and that's all you can say about it. But certainly it began for me in a small way when I was in The Graduate in Davis, California. As I tried to explain to George. I was drinking pitchers of beer in there after an intramural football game around 1976, and I overheard a gal at our picnic table explaining how she couldn't eat one of their fine hamburgers because she was a vegetarian because she didn't believe in the killing of animals because she was a Buddhist. And I thought how interesting. And then that night still drunk I was taking a bag of trash from our lab out to the dumpsters behind the building, and when I tossed the bag I heard a whimper come from inside the dumpster. I checked it out pulling out bags of trash getting spooked by this whimper, and finally I found the source, which was a dog that had been used in one of the tutorials.

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They put them under and then do a variety of surgical work on them to teach how the insides of living animals look, and then they put them down. Happens all the time in vet schools. But *this* time there had been a fuckup or the dog was especially tough because they hadn't killed it off, and there it was without its hind legs and most of its intestines, whimpering and looking up at me as if I could help it. The best I could do was to try to put it out of its misery and it snapped weakly at me as I tried hands and boots and plastic bags, it fended off every effort until I broke its neck with the dumpster lid and I wandered for a time and found myself on the women's softball field feeling horrible. And then I looked up across the street and the parking lot and I saw the round *The Graduate* sign blinking on and off and something turned in me, what I later understood to be my *bodhi* or awakening to the true nature of reality, and I said to the softball diamond, "God damn it, I am a *Buddhist.*"

I didn't even know what I meant by it. But I quit vet school and as it turned out some of my buddies were going to Nepal at that same time to score some hash, so I went with them. None of us knew the first thing about Nepal except that it was supposed to be big on hash and Buddhism, and we were right about one so we had a fine time in Kathmandu but after a while we got bored so we decided to go trekking as this seemed to be all the rage there. This was around August first, right in the middle of a bad monsoon, but we were so ignorant we had no idea there were trekking seasons and non-trekking seasons, and the people in the shops were happy to rent us gear and so we took off on the bus to Lamosangu and started trekking toward Everest. Naturally the clouds were constant and the trails were deluged, and we ate all the wrong food and drank the water from the streams which looked so clear and clean and so we got horribly sick, and we were bit all over by leeches, and it seemed to us we were not exactly catching on as to what the appeal of this trekking was. I mean we were so ignorant that we thought when they said "mani walls" they were saying "money walls," we thought that every time we passed a mani wall we were going by the village bank, each stone a thousand dollar bill or something like that and it seemed to us that they had figured out a very clever way to stop bank robberies, only we were mystified as well, passing wall after wall after wall we said to each other if these folks have got so much cash how come they don't buy no toilets? Which is stupid if you think about it but we didn't we just kept on trekking, sick as dogs but bound and determined to catch sight of Everest or die trying, and it was going to be a close thing.

But one morning I got up early to go out and pee, and I walked out of the teahouse and all the clouds were gone. It was the first time we weren't completely socked in, we'd never seen anything higher than the top of

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our hats and had hiked through mist and forest like we were in a lumpy Amazon without the slightest idea of what was all around us, so when I walked out the door that morning I was still completely innocent of any real sight of the Himalayas, and I am from Arkansas. I think that everyone gets their sense of how big things should be from their home and their childhood, and where I came from valleys were farm-sized things, rivers were creeks you could ford most anywhere, and mountains were hills a couple hundred feet high at best—the landscape had a certain scale and that to me was the way things were, that was the natural order, that was what I was used to. So when I walked out that teahouse door in the Dudh Kosi and looked around blinking in the dawn light, deep down in this enormous *gap* in the world which apparently was a *valley* which it would take at least a day to cross and a week to walk up—and then, standing behind this mile-deep valley and way, way, *way,* above it, these vertical spiky snow-and-rock monster towers that were obviously *unbelievably big mountains*—! Well, if I hadn't clapped my teeth together my heart would have jumped straight out of my mouth. And since that day I have never left the Himalayas.

Anyway, I know this doesn't completely explain how I became a Tibetan Buddhist monk, but if I told the whole story of how I met Kunga Norbu and became his disciple and went undercover into Tibet it would take me forever, and besides George was going cross-eyed as I told him all this about my past. He was done eating, so he waved a hand and cut me off.

"Shambhala, Freds, Shambhala. You were telling me about Shambhala."

"Yes I was."

"You could take me there?"

"Sure. Do you want to go?"

"Do I want to visit Shambhala? Do I want to see Shangri-La? Damn, Freds—why didn't you put it that way in the first place?"

"Because visiting it ain't the point. Saving it is the point, and that's got to happen here. Besides, you wouldn't have believed me if I had just up and asked you out of the blue do you want to visit Shambhala."

"I still don't believe you, Freds. But it's monsoon. There's nothing else to do. And if you're right, well. . . . " He grinned. "You take me there and show me, and then I'll see about helping you out."

So a couple days later we left the Hotel Star at dawn and woke up one of the taxi drivers whose car was his castle and had him drive us to the Central Bus Stop, and there we located our usual ticket agent who took us through the mud and dead buses to a decrepit old clunker that was packed full. Now in any other season we would have made a beeline for

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the roof and traveled in style up there, but because it was monsoon we had to jam our way inside. A Rawang man and his wife and daughters were in our seats, so we sat on the floor between the front seats and the partition separating the passengers from the driver's compartment. About an hour later we began the typical Kathmandu departure. Get out of the depot and stop to scrape off the hitchhikers who had jumped on the roof during the run up the mud ramp. Stop for gas. Stop to search through the southern quarter of the city for an engine part. Stop to fix a flat. This time when the spare tire was on they found they couldn't get the flat tire secured under the bus where the spare had come from. They spent an hour trying, and even the driver got down to look at it. He was a big guy with a thick black moustache, looked like an ex-Gurkha and nothing could faze him, he attended to his driving and usually let his flight crew handle all the other problems that every trip presented, so looking at this unattachable tire was a real concession. Finally he shrugged and pointed and the flight crew nodded and came on board and pushed all the aisle passengers back a bit, and maneuvered the flat tire in the door and up the steps and into the aisle, where it stood as tall as some passengers and much muddier.

So we left Kathmandu at noon when we were supposed to be off at seven, which was not bad. Every bus ride in Nepal is an adventure and I enjoy them no end, but George doesn't. On this one he had fallen into a trance to try to escape. Every time he came out of his trance he would look into the driver's area and see the mechanic sticking his head down into the engine compartment with a lit cigarette between his teeth, making adjustments while the engine ran, and George would groan and fall back into his trance again. A wire crate of chickens was set just under the flat tire in the aisle, and every time the chickens looked up they figured they were about to be run over and would squawk madly, then overdose on panic and fall asleep, only to wake up and go through the trauma again. Right beside the chickens sat three Swiss trekkers breathing in the thick fog of cigarette and engine oil smoke like it was ambrosia, they were the kind of Swiss travelers you see in Asia that have been so stressed by the Formula 409 aspects of their culture that their compass has cracked and nothing suits these types better than to be stuck knee deep in manure and mismanagement in some Asian backwater, whereupon a Ludwig van Ninth look of bliss comes over them as they realize they couldn't get more miserably un-Swiss anywhere. So this bus was pleasing them no end.

Meanwhile we were trundling out of the Kathmandu valley, either east or west I shouldn't tell you which, and it had its usual dreamy look, monsoon clouds filtering the light so that the greens leaped out like Kodak ads, with villages in the distance little clumps of brown, sur-

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rounded by trees in pink or lavender bloom. Fields of early rice ran up into the clouds in hundreds of terraces, until it got hard to tell how far away a hillside was because you couldn't believe anyone would terrace a slope so fine. The hilltops were cut off by a cloud ceiling that got lower and darker until finally the pleasures of the view were wiped out by torrents of rain, rain so dense it looked like God had scooped up the Indian Ocean and dumped it on us. Typical monsoon afternoon. I don't think the driver could see past the windshield, but he just hunched forward a touch and carried on as usual.

After that there was nothing to do but meditate or watch the expertise of the driver, who was blindly navigating enormous mudholes and guiding the bus over landslides that had buried the road entirely. These were never cleared off but were driven over so often that a new track was established, weirdly lumpy and canted over. But our driver pushed through at a walking pace, timing every jolt and bounce to get him over bad spots, the engine clunking at about the same rpm as the wheels, and every time we lurched safely back onto the real road and splattered off at our maximum speed of around forty kilometers per hour.

Then just as our bladders were about to blow up and our brains to implode we stopped at a roadside village. The villagers crowded around to greet us and we burst through them like a gang of fullbacks, rushing in both directions down the road to the ends of the village to relieve ourselves. George and I and the Swiss were especially well attended by the village kids, and we peed into the bushes with a considerable audience giggling at us as we tried not to look at or step in the dismal and copious evidence of the intestinal problems of all the travelers who had been there before us. Naturally a road village has shitting grounds vastly larger than your typical hill village, and I knew by the expression on George's face that I didn't have to point this fact out to him.

We returned to the village center and sat at a table under a long tin roof. There wasn't much room between the road and a river, and this open-walled building filled most of it. Buildings across the road and up the hillside had been abandoned and were in the process of being torn down. Silent women served us big steel plates of mushy dhal baat while kids surrounded us to beg for money—one guy who looked about eight but could have been fourteen smoked a handrolled cigarette and kept saying "Candy? Smoke? Dollar? Ball point pen?" A gang of younger ones chased a pig from puddle to puddle, yanking on its tail until they were almost run over by a Jeep splashing through. People ran out to greet the Jeep but it didn't stop.

George passed on his dhal baat, and bought a bottle of lemon soda and two packets of Nebico wafers. This was in keeping with his usual culinary

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strategy while trekking, which he called prophylactic eating. You see, he had never really recovered from an early encounter with a plate of dhal baat that had had its rice insufficiently cleaned, so that it tasted "just like taking *raw dirt* and eating it *off the ground*" as he was fond of saying. After that he couldn't even look at the stuff without gagging, so he ended up not only practicing prophylactic antibiotics use, meaning he popped pills daily in hopes of discouraging bacteria from catching hold in him—he also practiced his prophylactic eating, meaning he ate nothing but boiled potatoes that he peeled himself, hardboiled eggs that he peeled himself, Nebico wafers that he unwrapped himself, and water that he both filtered and triple iodinated. It didn't work, but it did make him feel better.

So we sat there and George ate his placebo diet and the clouds pissed on us and the villagers either stood around a little woodstove under the tin roof or rushed out to greet the occasional passing vehicle, and all in all it was like a play put on for George's benefit called "The Degradation of the Nepali Roadside Village," only it was real. Roads were built and people either used them to go and join the unemployed in Kathmandu, or stayed behind and tried to live off the road traffic, which would have worked if only a few of them were trying it, but with all of them trying none could succeed, and all around them the terraces fell to pieces in the rain.

But I never said a word to George about this. I just left him to watch it.

An hour later the bus's flight crew decided it was time to go and we all climbed back aboard and wedged into our places and were off again, at about the hour we had been scheduled to arrive at our final destination. Almost immediately we hung a left onto a road that looked like something out of a civil engineering handbook, a narrow lane of asphalt maybe two buses wide at the widest, black as coal and perfectly smooth, with concrete gutters and abutments and supports and drains, and thick wire mesh covering the hillside above the many switchbacks that the road made. "Hey," George said, cheering up. "The Swiss have been here."

"That's right," I said. "This is the road they're planning to extend to Chhule."

"Is it the Swiss who are going to do it?"

"No, they're done. It's someone else, no one I know is sure who."

The switchbacks marked the slope like sewing machine stitching, but even so the grade was a bit steep by Nepali standards, and our old clunker only just beat a walking pace up it, slowing down even more in the turns. Each hairpin was a major effort for the driver, because this bus like all Indian buses had a steering wheel that had to be spun three or four times just to dodge a rock in the road much less make a one eighty. Our driver

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had to twirl his big lasso like Mr. Toad on the wild ride, while one of his assistants hung out the door to tell him how much room there was to spare before we fell off the road and back down the gorge. The assistant's signaling system consisted of shouts of panic of varying intensity so that every time we made a right turn we suspected it was the end and the chickens were positive. This went on all afternoon. We did nothing but vertical distance, so that a full three hours after we had left the roadside village we could still look right down on its roofs, a fact that George couldn't seem to come to terms with, "Look at that," he'd groan at every turn, "it's *still there*." But then we rose into the clouds and couldn't see anything at all.

Hours passed and it got darker. The driver stared through his windshield decals into thick mist, driving by telepathy. I began to feel all warm and cozy, lulled by the bus's motion, as if I was in a teahouse and the engine was a stove. I love trips like this. I mean what is life for, when you get down to it? Days exactly like this one, if you ask me. We were on our way to Shambhala, after all. No one could expect it to be a simple thing.

Having passed through all transitory emotion himself, George became philosophic. "This had better be the real thing you're taking me to," he said.

"It is," I told him.

He looked doubtful. "I can see how a remote valley could stay hidden up here in the old days, but how do they do it now? I mean, how do they keep satellites from seeing them?"

"They don't. They're in the satellite photos."

"I thought it was a secret city?"

"It is, but nowadays it's more of a disguised city. The government in Kathmandu knows it's there, but they just think it's one of their little high valley villages, with a Tibetan population. Someone from the district panchayat drops by from time to time, and everyone is friendly enough, they just don't tell him where he really is. The monastery doesn't look all that important, and most of the lamas stay out of sight when visitors are around. They pay their taxes, and send a representative to the panchayat and all, and they're left alone like any other remote village."

"So it doesn't look magical?"

"Not to the tax collectors."

"No gold towers and crystal palaces and all?"

"Well, there's some stuff in the monastery. But the truth is hardly anyone from Nepal ever comes by. Kathmandu seems to think of it as a Tibetan village that got caught on the wrong side when they formalized the border with China. Which essentially is true. Besides, Kathmandu

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doesn't pay any attention to villages right next door, much less one as remote as this."

"So it's safe."

"But the thing is, if too many people were to start dropping by, the secret would get out for sure."

"Thus the road paranoia."

"Right."

Much later, we began to stop at high villages, lit by kerosene lanterns and the bus's headlights. At each stop a few passengers got off and the rest settled back into a stupor, until finally it was past midnight and we were rolling into a completely dark village that was The End Of The Road. The driver honked his horn and we fell out like cripples, and the teahouse keepers emerged and rounded us up.

After recovering our backpacks from the roof of the bus and finding them soaked, George and I followed a man into a teahouse I had frequented before. As we staggered up to the crowded bedroom on the second floor I looked in the kitchen, and there in the harsh glare of a Coleman lantern was our bus driver, hunched by the stove scooping up huge handfuls of steamed rice and wolfing them down, cleaning off the last of a big steel plate with a stolid expression and a regular movement. Just another day's work as far as he was concerned—seventeen hours of driving a lousy bus over bad roads in horrible weather, surely ten trillion turns of that old steering wheel. It made me happy to think that such heroes out of Homer still walked the face of this earth. By the time we got up the next morning he and his crew would be long gone, back down to Kathmandu where they would turn around and start the whole epic over again the very next day. Some people really work for a living.

The village at the end of the road was in the same state as the road village from the day before—focused on the great dirt runway that slashed it in two, new buildings clustered around the road ending, old buildings torn down for construction materials or firewood, and the whole thing surrounded by shitting fields, especially by the river running at the far edge of town. This happens because of the lack of toilet paper, but it does no good to their water supply. As we completed our morning business there George said "I don't see why they can't believe in invisible bugs. Air is invisible. Their gods are invisible."

"Germ theory just ain't intuitive, George."

"Neither is religion."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"But why should there be a difference?"

"It may be that the reason for the existence of the universe is a more pressing question for most people than the reason why they get the runs."

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"That's crazy."

"Besides," I said, "if you got a good enough answer to the first question hen the second one is answered too, right?"

He only squinted at me in a certain suspicious way he has, a look he ften gave me.

We returned to our teahouse, and after a breakfast of Nebico wafers nd hardboiled eggs, we were on our way. Backpacks on, the trail found. rekking at last.

Now in most seasons this would be the fun part—trekking, one of the nest activities known to humanity. But in the monsoon everything gets ery wet. Trails become streams, streams become rivers, rivers become iller torrents. There is a big increase in bugs, mold, rot, damp, and isease.

I like trekking in the monsoon, myself. But I bring along a little mbrella and a pair of wellies with their bottoms carved until they are lmost rubber crampons, so I had less trouble with the slick trails than eorge, who had disdained these accessories and was suffering the con- equences. He tended to ski the downhills, and his head was always wet, hich I have found is seldom conducive to good humor.

Still, we were trekking. Gone were the long views that in other seasons re such a joy, however. In the monsoon all you see are clouds, mist, ain, and whatever's there in the little bubble of visibility around you, ll of it looking green and wet and somehow otherwordly now that your ttention is fastened on it rather than the distance. The mossy trees look reign and fantastical, the trail is a reddish streak of mud leading you rough dripping green creepers, and the occasional chorten or mani wall oms out of the mist like something out of the *Bhaghavad Gita*, which a way it is. And every once in a while the mountains appear through aps in the clouds like live things flying overhead. Oh, it's a spacy thing ll right, trekking in the monsoon, and if you've got your brolly and ellies and a stick to knock aside the leeches, it can really be fun.

If you don't have those things . . . well, you get like George. None of is tour groups ever went out in monsoon and so of course he didn't ither, and now he was paying the price because he had forgotten how do it, if he ever knew. He kept falling on slippery patches and stepping the streams, until he couldn't have been wetter laid out in his bath. ain got in his eyes and he thought there was nothing to see anyway, nd since he wasn't looking he kept getting jumped by leeches, which a painless thing and without negative consequences, but unpleasant you dislike it. We'd be hiking past bushes or tall grass, and if you atched you would see that some of the little black twigs were wiggling round, trying to feel your heat, and if they did they would leap aboard nd weasel through socks or pants or boots and suck your blood. When-

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ever George looked down at his legs and caught one in the act, he howled. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Oh my God, *leeches*!"

"Put mosquito repellant on them, they'll drop right off."

"I *know*." And he'd drop his pack in a puddle and hurry like it was little rattlesnakes latched onto him.

Trying to make him feel better I said, "Hell, first time I came here with my buddies we went trekkin and you know back home when you're bit by a mosquito on the forearm some guys will trap them by tensing the forearm muscle, after which they can't get their sticker out of you and not only that they've got no stop valve neither, so they just keep swelling with your blood until they blow up, and where we came from this was considered a big laugh. So one of my buddies gets bit by a leech on the forearm and he says, 'Hail, I'll teach him to bite a Arkansas boy, I'm gonna give him the mosquito treatment' and he tenses his forearm and we start watching, but not only is this a leech it's apparently one of them cow leeches, it's got about ten million times the capacity of a mosquito and so it starts like a tiny little twig but just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger till it's like this black watermelon hanging off my buddy's arm. He keeled over in a faint and we squoze the leech to try and get some of his blood transfused back into him before we burned it off, but he was white as a sheet for about a week thereafter. Isn't that funny?"

No reply from George.

We trekked like this for about three days. All this time we were covering the ground that the proposed road would pass through when they built it, something I often pointed out to George, but he appeared unmoved by the prospect. In fact it seemed to me he was getting to think a road there wouldn't be a bad idea.

On the fourth morning he said "Come on, Freds, where is this place?"

"We're almost there. Couple days. But first we have to go cross-country around Chhule."

"What? Why?"

"That's where the Nepali Army outpost is. This is as far north as trekkers are allowed to go, you know, it's that zone they agreed on with the Chinese? The detrekkerized zone, twenty kilometers or some such."

"Ah. They're serious about that, aren't they."

"You bet. They've got a whole battalion based in Chhule, a hundred soldiers or so, all to keep anyone but locals from going any further north."

"But what about this road you're worried about?"

"They plan to build it right to Chhule. That's close enough to Shambhala that it would be fatal to the valley."

"Good."

"What?"

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"I mean, good that we're close."

"Yeah, we're almost there."

Which was almost true. The fact was, leaving the trail to bypass Chhule meant going cross country, and there is nothing harder than hiking cross country in the forests of the Himal. Wet, vertical, densely covered with leech-infested foliage—it's horrible hard work, in country usually left to the yetis, who make good use of it. But there was a kind of ledge high above the town that could be used as a path if you could find it—people from Shambhala had used it since the time Chhule was founded, but they did their best to leave no trace of their passing, so it was tough locating it in the cloud mist. Late in the afternoon we hacked our way to it, and we even found a nearly horizontal spot for our night's camp.

George, however, could not be convinced either that this was a viable campsite, or that we were on the path to Shambhala.

"What did you think?" says I. "Did you think it was gonna be easy to get to Shambhala? There ain't gonna be no superhighways to it. In fact we've seen the last of the trail. The whole rest of the way is cross country."

This was true, but once past Chhule we could descend back onto the valley floor. Once there we hiked immediately into the shelter of an enormous rhododendron forest, one that filled a good two miles of the valley. Because the monsoon had hit so early this year the whole forest was still in bloom, every tree an explosion of rich pink or white or lavender flowers, each flower big and bright and water-jeweled. We walked under a roof of millions of these wonders, with mist trailing between the gnarled black branches, and it was so strange and exquisite that even George shut up, and hiked along with his mouth hanging open.

Beyond the rhododendron forest we got into the weird tropical-arctic scrub that covers Himalayan valleys in the zone between about fourteen and seventeen thousand feet. This is God's own country if you ask me, mountain meadows covered with heather, spiky mosses, lichen, little shrubs, and alpine and tundra flowers. The valley here was clearly U-shaped, a glacial thing with steep granite walls, and we crawled up it like ants at the bottom of an empty swimming pool. The valley floor had silvery watertracks snaking all over it, and as we hiked beside these glacial streams we could hear rocks clunking along the bottom, rerouting even as we watched. And towering over the valley to each side were the snowy vertical peaks of the Himal crest, although on that trek we never saw them much because of the clouds.

We were nearing the border between Nepal and Tibet. The general trend of the range is east to west, but there are innumerable spur ranges, all twisted and contorted as you'd only expect when one continent is crashing under another at high speed. The political border tries to follow the crest of the range, but in some areas there's a knot of crossing ridges

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and it isn't at all clear what the "crest" is. In those areas the border gets kinky, and it's right in one of those kinks, where twenty thousand foot ridges jam into each other and push some peaks to twenty-five, that the high valley of Shambhala is located.

Still some miles to the south of this, George and I came to a Y-split in our valley, offering routes to west and north. The right fork was a long gradual rise to a pass that had served for centuries as a major trading route between Nepal and Tibet. It was this pass, Nangpa La, that explained the Army post in Chhule—their job was to shut it down.

The left fork was blocked by a mean wall, which we climbed, and above that was a long high skinny valley, with a glacier still filling its bottom. We followed the glacier up into a horseshoe ring of spiky peaks. This horseshoe wall was Shambhala's final protection from accidental visitors, and as we hiked to the head of the glacier, looking down at the rubble and melt ponds and blue seracs, and then up at the great curving wall of shattered stone, George said "Hell, Freds, you sure you aren't lost?"

The truth was this was just the spot where I always did get lost. I knew which low spot in the horseshoe ring was our pass, but crossing the glacier and snow fields to get to its bottom was no easy thing, especially when clouds swept in and filled the cirque with cottonball fog. But eventually I got us there, using an occasional line of yeti prints to guide me. These always take the cleanest line across any broken country, but those yetis will leap over crevasses that humans can only stare at shivering, so following their tracks can be unreliable.

At the foot of the wall we had to make camp, in a devil's golf course rock garden. And next morning it was snowing hard, miserable conditions for a nineteen thousand foot pass, but there was no advantage to waiting as it might snow for the next two months, so we put on crampons and started up. Soon we were so high there wasn't even any lichen. Every once in a while we saw prints in the snow, of people, and yetis, and snow leopards, and higher yet there were some unobtrusive trail ducks. And midafternoon, to George's surprise, the clouds blew away. You see, the Nepal side of the crest catches the monsoon and gets a few hundred inches of rain a year, but just twenty miles north in Tibet they are in total rain shadow desert and get about ten. So on the crest itself there are all kinds of micro-environments where the amount of rain is somewhere between the extremes, and much more livable than either. Shambhala's valley had just about the best climate possible for the area, one reason it was located there in the first place, I'm sure.

Anyway we had climbed into the clear, in brilliant cold windy sunshine above a cloud ocean, shadows black as night and each rock sticking out of the wind-slabbed snow just as distinct as if you were holding a microscope to it. We were no more than five hundred feet below our saddle,

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and now a faint line of footprints was clear, individual prints displaying huge big toes. "Look," I said. "Yeti prints."

"Come on, Freds. I don't believe in that stuff."

"George, you yourself saved a yeti in Kathmandu! You dressed him! You introduced him to Jimmy Carter! You gave him your Dodgers cap!"

"Yeah, yeah." Reluctantly he admitted the reality of what he had seen with his own two eyes. "But what would a yeti be doing up here?"

"What would a human be doing up here hiking barefoot?"

No reply from George.

We followed the footprints, which disdained switchbacks and headed straight for the pass. The air was thin indeed and it took a while to slog up the last section, but there in the pass was a line of chortens and mani walls, and prayer flags strung between poles all ripped to rags by the constant wind, and it was a sight to lift you right up to it, it made the last section like an escalator.

We could only stand to stay in the pass a few minutes, as the wind was brutal. Around us all the ridges banged together, cutting off our view of Tibet to the north, and in fact restricting our views in every direction. High on the wind came a brief squeal, and I pointed out to George what looked like a patch of moving snow. A snow leopard, helping to guard the sacred valley. But George didn't believe his sight any more than his memory.

Then we started our descent into a narrow valley, a fairly high one although since we had an airplane's view it didn't seem high at that moment. On the valley floor was the usual gravel spill of meandering streams, cutting through tiny bits of green and yellow terracing. Above those were abandoned yak herders' huts, some bare brown potato fields, some stone-walled pastures, and a few chortens. Farther downvalley, perched on an ancient butt moraine, was a gathering of stone buildings, all the slate roofs smoking in the midday sun. The buildings were surrounded by nomads' tents. In short, it was a completely ordinary Himalayan mountain village, with nothing to distinguish it except perhaps what looked like the ruins of an old monastery, built into a rocky ridge of the valley's side wall in *dzong* fortress style.

Feeling my heart flapping happily with the prayer flags behind us, I extended a hand. "There it is," says I to George. "There's Shambhala, there's the palace of Kalapa, there's the Lotus Kingdom! Yahoo!"

He gave me a long, long stare.

Well, I suppose he was expecting the Disneyland castle or a bunch of crystal houses floating ten feet off the ground, but that ain't the way it is. There was nothing to be done but let him get used to it, so I took off down the trail and he followed.

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Before long Colonel John jumped us from behind boulders, screaming "Halt!" at the top of his lungs. George like to died he was so startled.

Standing there before us was a compact wiry Westerner with a wizened lopsided face, wearing camouflage combat fatigues and toting a big old machine gun, which he had pointed straight at us.

"It's okay!" I said to both of them. "It's me, Colonel. Me and a good friend."

He stared at us with birdlike intensity. His face was strange, wrinkled like the face of an old monk who had spent too many years at high altitude in the sun—or, given the fatigues, as if he had been fighting a mountain war for twenty or thirty years. A big scarred crease in the left side of his head reinforced the latter notion, as did the 1950s military style butch haircut. But then the turquoise and coral necklaces and charm boxes hanging over his fatigues brought back the monk image, as did his eyes, which had a little Asian in them. All in all it was as if an old Tibetan monk and a retired Marine drill sergeant had been melted together into a single body. Which was more or less the case.

"George," says I carefully, "this is Colonel John Harris, late of the CIA and the U.S. Marine Corps. He helps valley security these days."

"I *am* valley security," the colonel snapped in a high Midwestern twang.

"Okay, well, this is George Fergusson, colonel. He's here to help us with the problem of that road extension to Chhule."

"Prove it," the colonel snapped.

"Well," I says, at a loss. Then I switched to Tibetan, speaking it slowly and clearly, as the colonel is one of the few people on earth to speak Tibetan worse than I. I chanted a brief prayer to the Köngchog Sum, the Three Precious Ones. "*Sannggyela kyabsu chio,*" I said, meaning "I seek refuge in the Buddha."

"Ah!" the colonel said, and let his gun hang from its shoulder strap. He put his hands together and gave us a novice monk's bow. "Honored by your presence," he said in Tibetan. "*Gendunla kyabsu chio,*" which means, "I take refuge in the monkhood." Which was very true for John.

"We're off to the valley," I told him, sticking to Tibetan. "Are you coming down tonight?"

"Standing watch," he said. He frowned, said in English, "Down tomorrow at oh eight hundred!"

"See you for breakfast, then," I said, and hustled down the trail with George close on my heels.

"Who the hell is *he*?" George asked me when we were out of earshot.

"Well, Shambhala picks up people from all over the world, you know. If they stumble across the valley and have the right spirit for it, they stay. If they don't have the right spirit, they never even recognize it.

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You'd be surprised how many trekkers come over the pass by accident and just figure they've run across another remote village and leave."

No reply from George.

Finally he says, "So when did this Colonel John arrive?"

"He was in the CIA when they helped the Tibetan resistance fight the Chinese, back in the sixties. You know about that?"

"No."

"They kept it real secret. John spent a few years in Mustang with a guerrilla group. So he must have gotten here sometime in the early seventies. Now he's a monk, and also kind of like Shambhala's defense department."

"Defense department," George said.

We dropped like an avalanche to the valley floor, and got there just after sunset with our knees throbbing. I led George straight to the house of Kunga Norbu's family, and as I walked down the narrow stone streets between the familiar three-story buildings, I was breathing in the smells of milktea and smoke and wet yak wool and they went like a knife right to my memory's heart, and I laughed and started yelling hi to the people we passed. A light snow twinkled in the air like mica chips, and I found myself dancing a spinning dance down the street, drunk with homecoming.

Kunga Norbu's oldest sister Lhamo greeted us at their door with a big smile and brought us upstairs to the kitchen and sat us down on a broad bench against one blanketed wall and commenced feeding us. Most of the family crowded in to look at George and talk to me—Kunga Norbu's ancient mother, his younger sisters and their families, some more distant relations they had taken in, and relations of relations, until we were jammed in tight. I sat there warming my feet by the fire trying to collect my Tibetan to talk to them. Lhamo fed us a feast, tsampa and butter tea of course but also yak cheese, margam butter, a dried cream called *pumar,* and a kind of cheesecake they call *thud,* maybe for the sound it makes when it bottoms out in your stomach. All the familiar tastes and faces and the smell of the yak dung fire had me purring, and happily I tried to tell them about our trip.

George of course was silent throughout all this, and he avoided his butter tea, and ate as little of his food as he could get away with. Even that amount meant his prophylactic diet was wiped out and it seemed to me he was brooding on this, listening to his digestion and perhaps adding up in his mind the quantity of antibiotics he had brought along. He glanced around the room, at the carpets and sashes and the bowls and pots of bright dented copper and the black iron steamer and the hanging utensils and the brazier and the tall butter churns and the *nyindrog* boxes and the loom in the corner, and he looked tired and low,

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as if this wasn't at all what he had expected. A crowded smoky little wood and brick room, I reckon he saw, and he was let down by that.

Well, I suppose Himalayan Buddhist village life isn't the kind to reveal all its beauties right off the bat anyway, especially in the monsoon, although as I said Shambhala's valley is protected from the worst of the weather. Still, it rained or snowed an hour or two almost every day. And ever since the Chinese invaded Tibet Shambhala has suffered from overpopulation, serving as it does as a sort of secret advance refugee camp. That's why the mountain nomads' big yak wool tents surrounded the village, and why all the old stone houses and Kalapa monastery were so full of people. The crowding caused problems, and things were not in great shape to impress George. Lhamo tried, putting us in the best bedroom in the house above the kitchen where it was warmest, but George kept having nightmares that the house was burning down because smoke from the kitchen stove seeped up into our room and made it smell like the house was burning down. So every morning he stumbled out of the house sleepless and exhausted, and there before him was a strangely packed mountain village, as if it was bazaar day except it wasn't, and sick kids were howling with the flu and the monastery head doctor Dr. Choendrak wandered through the rain wringing his hands, because all the great plant and mineral medicines from Mendzekhang, the hospital monastery in Lhasa, were long since used up.

It didn't help George's impression of things when Kunga Norbu came down to say hello and just stared through George in his usual style, and then assigned us to work with a crew rebuilding terrace walls, which is convict-style labor, including breaking up rocks with a sledgehammer like characters in a cartoon. A day or two of that and George was unhappy. "Goddamn, Freds, I coulda been soaking rays in Thamel and here I am *breaking rocks*. This isn't Shambhala and you know it."

I assured him it was.

"Why is it so crowded then? Every house has two or three times as many people as it should, and then there's all these tents. The Sherpas would never live this way."

I told him about the refugee problem. About people crossing uncrossable passes to escape the Chinese, or crawling up the impassable gorge that dropped out of the valley onto the Tibetan plateau, risking death and often finding it in hopes of getting away.

"So it's emergency conditions," George said, surprised.

"If you can still call it that after forty years."

That night George looked around him a little more carefully. And for the first time he noticed that there were people sick right there in the house with us. A cousin of Lhamo's named Sindu had a baby boy who

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was getting weak with the runs. And this cousin Sindu was a young woman, nearly a girl, with a lot of Nepali blood in her so that her face was sharper than the Tibetans', one of those trans-Himal faces that is so beautiful you can't believe it's real. And no husband to be seen. So George sat there watching her as she moved around the kitchen caring for her sick boy, and I could see him adding up his pills in his mind.

Next day Colonel John drafted us to make a firewood run, which meant rounding up a string of yaks and driving them downvalley all morning, to the upper end of the gorge that snaked down into Tibet. Yaks are big hairy delinquents, sullen and prone to bursts of rebellion and non-co-operation, and the colonel drove them like they were inductees at boot camp, beating them fiercely with his walking stick and getting nothing but looks from their big round bilious eyes.

Midday we left the yaks on the meadow and climbed the steep south slope of the valley wall until we reached a stand of pine. Colonel John took three small axes out of his backpack, Iron Age things with no heft at all, and we set to work cutting down the trees he pointed to. "Man," George said unhappily as he chopped, "this is horrible! This is what they call deforestation, isn't it?"

The colonel and I paused to give him a look.

"No choice," the colonel said. "Yak dung doesn't burn without some wood in the fire."

"But the erosion—"

"I know about erosion!" the colonel shouted, nearly throwing his axe at George. "We leave the stump and roots to hold what they can, and replant with seedlings." He hacked angrily at the tree he was working on. "For three thousand years this valley had a stable population, but with Tibet enslaved what can the Dalai Lama do? This is one of the only escapes."

George asked hesitantly if some of the refugees couldn't be transferred to the Tibetan villages and settlements in India.

"Who would you send?" the colonel demanded. "Send away from the last free and whole place on earth? Send down to some farm in Madras where they die of low altitude sickness? I've seen them down there; take them to a mountain like we did when we brought the resistance to Colorado and they run right out and jump in the snow! We had a yak from a zoo there and they ran up and hugged it!" He brought a tree down with a fierce chop. "I wouldn't want to choose who goes away from here."

"Tell George about your Khampa guerrillas," I suggested.

John sighed. "Got those fellas to Colorado back in the days when you could count on the American government to fight the communists, and I asked a room full of them, How many of you boys would jump out of an airplane to fight the Chinese, and they didn't know a damn thing

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about parachutes and every one of them raised his hand. And I said these are my kind of boys! This was what the Marine Corps used to be before it went soft! Came over here and wreaked havoc on those killers! Till that chicken Birendra betrayed us!"

With that he attacked another tree, chopping as if he were working on the king of Nepal's knees, and muttering in disconnected phrases that I could see meant little to George. "Soup and coffee out of tin cans, running till their hearts popped!" *Chop chop chop.* "Hans on one side and Gurkhas on the other! Scattered to the twelve winds!" *Chop chop chop.* "Dalai Lama said quit but who could surrender to Birendra! Pachen cut his throat instead and I don't blame him! Should have done it myself!" And he brought the tree down, swinging wildly.

Hoping to distract him, I suggested in Tibetan that we had cut as much wood as the yaks could carry.

"We'll carry too," he snarled at me in English, and kept on cutting like a chain saw.

So it was late afternoon before we dragged back upvalley in a cold rain, loaded down with small pines. I let the colonel get ahead of us so I could answer the questions George was eyeballing me. The colonel and some Khampas, I told him, had continued to fight after King Birendra had buckled to Mao and told the Nepali Army to help the Chinese destroy the Tibetan guerrillas based in Mustang. After this disaster the colonel and some Khampas had worked out of the mountains in Tibet until they were ambushed or something—the Colonel remembered it poorly because that was when he was wounded in the head, and he wandered out of his mind in the wilds of Tibet for an unknown time until he came as if homing to roost up the gorge to Shambhala. There Dr. Choendrak had cured him and brought back his memory, at least to a certain extent. "He's still a bit mixed up," I said.

"I noticed that."

"Depending on which language you speak to him he acts completely different."

George looked at the little tree-backed figure driving the yaks ahead of us. "I bet he had his language center damaged, and if he learned most of his Tibetan after the injury, it would have to be stored on the other side of his brain. So depending what language you use with him, a different half of his brain is dominant."

"Here they figure it's a matter of incarnations."

"He thinks he's a Tibetan monk whose spirit was most recently in a Marine?"

"Some of the time."

We climbed the ancient terminal moraine and caught sight of the village above us. A shaft of sunlight cut through the clouds and lit the

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walls of stone and sod, the slate-roofed buildings all smoking, the yaks standing like furry black boulders here and there in the brown potato fields, and it looked like the middle ages on some colder planet. We had spent all day gathering wood that would barely keep the village through the night, and every day folks had to go out and do the same, farther and farther away each time. "Man," George said, dropping his trees on the stone-flagged stable yard outside Lhamo's place. He didn't know what else to say.

Lhamo had a big meal ready for us, and we were beat and starving, and helplessly George spooned it in. He didn't have to deal with dhal baat, but the soup was crowded with a vegetable they managed to grow in the lower valley, a vegetable I'd never caught the name of but which on the vine looked like an okra the size of a football, with long flexible tines growing out all over it. Chopped up and floating in the soup it was unappealing to the eye, though the texture was okay and it had little taste. As a side dish they had a curry so hot you could warm your hands by it, and after a couple tries at that George returned sweating to his soup and even tried drinking his butter tea, which is an acquired taste and seemed to give him some trouble. It was the Scylla and Charybdis of foodland for George, but bravely he swam on and finished the meal.

And so of necessity he abandoned his prophylactic eating. At the same time he watched cousin Sindu trying to feed her sick child that night, with little success. And in the morning he dug in his backpack and came up with his antibiotics, a five-gallon Ziploc bag jam-packed with pills. "Freds, we gotta help these folks," he says. "I don't really have enough here to help everybody, but if we just help a few of them, you know."

"We'll have to tell Dr. Choendrak about it," I told him. So we took the antibiotics to the monastery and George told Dr. Choendrak about them, and he examined the pills and went into a consultation with the Manjushri Rimpoche, the leader of Shambhala, and the Rimpoche decided that every sick child would get an equal share of the pills, which when they figured it out came to about four pills per kid. When George heard that he cried "No! That's too little to do any good, none of them'll be helped by that!"

Dr. Choendrak explained to him that they knew about that aspect of antibiotics, but they figured that in conjunction with the plant medicines they were able to grow it would go better, and it was important to make sure everyone sick got some of the Western medicine.

George was disgusted, but I tried to reassure him. "They're going on the placebo theory, George, and you can't be at all sure they aren't right. Those antibiotics are mostly placebo anyway."

He just gave me that squint.

So all his antibiotics were gone, and he was eating the valley's food,

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which was clean but certainly had different bugs in it than he was used to. And so he got sick. The usual thing—runs, fever, no appetite, generally feeling shitty. Also bored, fractious, and depressed. Three or four days of that and he was going crazy in the house, so I suggested he go with Lhamo and Sindu to the river to wash clothes.

Now I've been concentrating on the problems Shambhala was having and they were considerable, but still it was Shambhala, mystic capital of the world, and there were some special things about it aside from Kalapa monastery and the lamas and the history of the place. Up in a courtyard of the monastery, for instance, was an eternal holy flame shooting out of the side of the mountain, a strange and impressive sight at dawn or dusk, or in the middle of a ceremony. And down at the bottom of the valley, near the gorge, one whole bank of the river was pure turquoise, sticking out of the mountainside like a hill of solidified sky, littering the river downstream with blue pebbles and boulders.

And most important of all for daily life there, the valley's river began with a hot spring, which like the eternal flame poured out of solid rock mountainside. The hole the water came out of had been carved into a perfect circle, and as it emerged the water steamed and kept the whole area damp, so that brilliant green ferns and mosses grew all over. Chortens and mani stones and prayer flags stood around it, and prayer wheels spun in the stream, wood and tin cylinders painted with bright mandalas, squeaking as they milled out prayers. Moss had covered all the curvy Sanskrit lettering carved into the mani stones and the rockface, so that it always seemed to me like the moss itself was spelling out *Om mani padme hum.* All in all, a spacy place.

They used it for their laundry, by diverting some of the water down a carved runnel which fell into a shallow pool that had a stone-flagged bottom and squared-off sides. Here on sunny mornings people washed clothes, mostly women, though monks and other men often joined them. The women came in their long wraparound black dresses with colorful smock fronts, babies wrapped to their backs or let loose to wander around. The air would be steamy and the sun radiant on your skin, but it was cold in the shadows so the warm water was a blessing. The women wore their black hair pulled back smooth and flat. They mostly had the flat faces of Tibetans, but there were touches of India and elsewhere in women like Sindu, because this was a crossroads even if it was hidden. Bare brown feet in the water, dresses hitched up around the thighs revealing brown calves harder than baseball bats, smell of milktea and smoke and herb soap rising from the wet clothes as they wrung them out steaming and beat them against the flat smooth black stone flagging to each side of the pool—yes, the laundry pool was a fine place.

And George appeared to like it. At least he came back from mornings

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there a little less disgruntled. He took to walking there with cousin Sindu and her little boy, and he looked after the kid while she washed, which was easy work as the kid was still sick. And she would talk to the kid in Tibetan and George would nod, saying "Uh huh, yeah, that's exactly what I think," which made her and the other women laugh.

I had asked Lhamo about Sindu, and found out that her husband was alive, off to the west of Nepal on a trading expedition. This kind of thing happens a lot in the trans-Himal villages, and as a result marriages up there tend to have quite a bit of flex in them. So when I saw George fooling with the kid, and Sindu laughing at him, I thought, Ho boy. Look at this.

It was odd to watch them together. Sometimes they seemed to understand one another perfectly and to be quite a match—an attractive couple, laughing at something they had seen, and I would think What do you know, George has got him a Sherpani girlfriend. His *dakini,* one of the female deities who guide you to wisdom, perhaps. Then just seconds later, for no reason I could pin, there would seem to open a gap between them bigger even than language. Suddenly they would look like creatures from different planets, aliens trying out gestures to see if they would work. But even those moments didn't look awkward—if there was a gap, neither of them seemed especially worried about bridging it. They looked content to stand on opposite banks and wave at each other.

So that was cute to watch, and Lhamo and I and the other gals at the pool got quite a laugh out of it. But meanwhile George was still sick, and so were the kids. He might as well have tossed his pills in the river for all the good they appeared to have done. He himself got thinner and thinner, and I know most nights he had to rush out and stumble around in the dark outhouse, freezing outside and burning inside, crouching over the little hole in the floor. It's amazing what you can get used to; I've gone through times like that myself and know that you can get so used to it that you can do the whole operation almost in your sleep, navigating medieval buildings and doors and locks without ever even waking up—sometimes—while other nights are so uncomfortable and strange that they etch themselves on your mind, and you hang out there in the freezing dark feeling it is some sort of negative *bodhi* and that you are far from home. I'm sure that George suffered more than one night like that.

And the kids bawled, and lay in their beds looking dry-skinned and hot and listless, and shitting watery shit. "Damn it," George said, "diarrhea is serious for little tykes like these, they get so dehydrated they die."

In fact Sindu's boy didn't look good, and a lot of infants in the village were the same. Such a crowded place! Several times folks dropped by to

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ask George if he had any antibiotics left, and all he could do was throw up his hands. "All gone! All gone! Freds, tell them I'm sorry, all I've got now is Lomotil but that just blocks you up, I shouldn't give them that should I?"

I didn't think he should.

Then he got an inspiration. "Freds, what about that formula you're supposed to give kids with diarrhea, the one the UN wants to spread all over the third world, it's made of simple stuff that everyone has, and it prevents the dehydration. Come on, man, what is it?"

"Never heard of it," I told him.

This drove him crazy. "It's something really obvious." But he couldn't think of it.

Then one morning swirling a glass of milktea he says, "Wasn't it basically salt water? Salt water with maybe a little sugar in it?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to drink salt water."

"Normally no, but when you've got the runs it helps get the water into your cells."

"I thought that's just what it prevented."

"Normally yes, but in this case no."

"Are you sure enough to try it?"

Long silence. Finally he said "Damn, I wish I had more tetracyclin."

But in the days that followed, Sindu's son got weaker and weaker, and a lot of the rest of the kids did too. George decided he had the formula right, and he got me to take him to the monastery to see Dr. Choendrak.

In Kalapa's big courtyard George stood staring at the eternal flame, his mouth hanging open. "Just what the hell is *that*?" he says.

"That is the holy eternal Kalacakra flame," I told him. "Religious shrine since the earliest times here."

"It's gas, Freds. They've got a natural gas supply right here in the valley!"

"So they do."

"Well—" He seized his head in both hands to keep it from blowing up on him. "Why don't they use it? They've got deforestation, they could pipe this gas down into stoves and solve the problem!"

"I guess since it's a holy shrine and a sign from one of their deities it never occurred to them," I said.

George couldn't believe it. "Here they are cutting down all their trees and watching their soil wash away and this big fucking fire is burning right in their face! What are you all thinking here, Freds? What kind of paradise is this anyway?"

"Religious."

"My Lord."

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Then Dr. Choendrak joined us, and George got me to act as translator. "There's a lot of flu in the kids here," he told the doctor.

I repeated that to Dr. Choendrak and he nodded. "Their blood has mixed with their bile, and we need to separate it."

"He knows," I said to George.

"Ask him what he's doing about it."

Dr. Choendrak shook his head. They were making medicines as fast as they could, medicines made of plants that I couldn't translate for George.

"Ask him if there are any salts in the medicine."

The doctor said there were.

"How much?" George demanded.

Eventually Dr. Choendrak had to take us to the dispensary and show him. Turned out there was a good heaping tablespoon of pure ground-up Tibetan rock salt in every canister of the water the doctor was feeding the kids.

"Oh," George said, nodding. "Well, tell him he should add a little sugar too."

I translated that for the doctor and he nodded. Turned out they put in about a tablespoon of honey as well.

"Oh!" George said, nonplussed. "Well! Good for him! Tell him the World Health Organization recommends that very same thing!"

Dr. Choendrak nodded, and said that was good.

Suddenly the doctor seemed a really reasonable guy to George. "Maybe their drugs do have some antibacterial action, and the salt and sugar water will give more time for their immune systems to kick in. The little kids need that."

Before we left George made me tell Dr. Choendrak about his plan for the eternal flame—he described ceramic pipes, a big central stove in the village or in the monastery itself, a whole seat-of-the-pants exercise in civil engineering. And in the days after that he started accompanying Dr. Choendrak on his rounds, entertaining the kids while they were checked out, or holding them while the more bitter medicines were administered. And he made all of them drink lots of the water that had generous doses of salt and sugar in it. A sort of language of action grew between him and the doctor, and they got to be buddies even though they didn't understand a word the other said. In fact given the conflicting state of their medical theories, that was probably a help.

And in the next couple of weeks the flu epidemic waned, for what reason no one could say—but no one had died of it, and so everyone was happy with Dr. Choendrak and with the appropriate deities, and with George as well. George was real happy too, although his own digestion

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never did get quite right and he was prone to going cross-eyed and running off in a panic to the outhouse.

But after that he was friendlier to the monks, which was important, as they were everywhere in the valley. Climb up a slope for firewood and look back down on the browns and grays and the greens of the *chingko* barley terraces, and there would be these maroon dots jumping out all over the landscape. Monks.

They fit into the society in the same sort of way—you saw them everywhere, but couldn't be sure what they were doing. Not exactly authority figures, nor the holier-than-thou types that our preachers tend to be, men who can strike dead any conversation on earth just by walking in on it unexpected—no, here the monks and the smaller group of nuns were woven into things, out in the fields hoeing, stacking yak dung after it had been laid out to dry in the sun, laughing at rude jokes. It was hard for George or any Westerner to understand, coming as we do from a place where religion is mostly ignored or used as a cover for theft. That's why so many were so quick to believe the lies the Chinese spread about Tibet, that stuff about an evil priesthood taxing poor serfs into poverty—that's how it would have been if the system were ours, in fact it is a pretty good description of TV evangelism now I come to think of it. And it was as convenient as hell for the Chinese, who with us looking the other way could not only torture, murder, enslave, imprison, and starve the Tibetans, but also tell everyone that of course they were only doing it for the Tibetans' own good. Saving them from themselves.

And being more like the Chinese than the Tibetans, we went for it. After all we did the same to the religious elder culture on "our land" not all that long ago, so we want to believe the Chinese, or at least not think about it. George, traipsing all over the south slope of the Himalaya, digging the unbelievable mountains—of course he didn't care to think about the genocide proceeding on the north slope. It would be like tooling around in the Bavarian Alps in the 1940s, and pausing to wonder about those plumes of smoke on the horizon.

So it took him a while to see it, you bet. A while planting potatoes and fixing terrace walls and hunting firewood, with a monk or a nun in the crowd humping a load or cracking jokes. A while of hearing the chants every day at dawn, or seeing a farmer meditating in his field, or women cutting mani stones, or the kids spinning the prayer wheels with loads of firewood tied to their backs. A while of watching the way everyone pitched in on the communal work without tallying who had done what. A while of figuring out relatives, and discovering that every family had monks or nuns, that they were not hereditary but came right out of the farmers every generation, the monasteries hoping to get the best and

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brightest but also taking the feebs and the handicapped, and naturally getting the oddballs too, the religious space cadets. All those dots of maroon in the brown and green, adding the final touch of color to the scene—when George saw that and understood it, he saw everything new.

And so I said to Kunga Norbu, "Can't you show him some little extra, some bit of Shambhala magic to give him that last shove?"

Kunga Norbu said "Freds, you've got it wrong as usual, we don't do tantric exercises to impress people. But he is welcome to visit the Manjushri Rimpoche in his chambers. And next week the Dalai Lama's youngest sister is making a visit here. He will witness that."

"Right on," says I.

The very next day, first thing in the morning, I took George to his audience with Sucandra, the Manjushri Rimpoche and the King of Shambhala—the equal, in Tibetan Buddhism, of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas.

We were led out of the yellow morning light through a grove of sandalwood trees and into the dark lower chambers of Kalapa Monastery, in amongst thick wood beams black with centuries of stove smoke and butter lamps. Every beam on these floors was covered with festival masks, each a brilliantly colored pop-eyed toothy demon face, heavy on green and red and yellow, with splashes of blue and white and gold. Bönpa nightmares they were, the scariest faces you would ever want to run into. Seeing them it was no mystery to me why the Buddha had been so welcomed in Tibet.

Then it was up stairs for flight after flight, because Kalapa was a *dzong*, a fortress monastery built back in the days when they had to worry about invasion by Ghenghis Khan or Alexander the Great. So it was plugged into a steep rocky ridge of the valley wall, looking like a squared-off outcropping of the ridge itself. Each level was set back from the one below it, and as we climbed higher on steep well-worn stairs we passed through larger and larger rooms, each with more light pouring into it than the one below. We passed through the library, where thousands of volumes of the *Kalacakra* and the *Tengyur* were set against the wall, short wide thick loose-leaved black-bound volumes, and scrolls in boxes like player piano rolls. Then through a music room, where drums and cymbals and long horns were kept. Then up into the sunniest room yet, where the walls were painted white, and the smooth wood floor had a sand-painting mandala at its center. "What's this?" George asked, looking in as we passed by.

"That was Essa's room," I told him.

"Essa?"

"Jesus, you know."

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No reply from George.

Finally we were led into what appeared to be the highest room in Kalapa. Its walls were hung with carpets that showed the history of Tibetan Buddhism in bright mandala patterns. Other than that the room was empty. The south wall was made of big sliding panel shutters, and the monk who had led us up the stairs slid these back to let in cool crisp morning air, and the sound of chanting from some floor below.

The monk left, and after a bit another one entered. Then I saw the new monk's face, and realized it was Sucandra, the Manjushri Rimpoche.

I had never seen him before, but I knew. I wish I could explain how. He was a reincarnate, a tulku like Kunga Norbu, only infinitely more powerful—he was the reincarnation of Padma Sambhava, the Indian yogi who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century, and he was also the Manjushri Boddhisatva, the boddhisatva of wisdom, meaning he had worked right to the edge of nirvana but had then chosen to return to subsequent incarnations in human form, just to help other people along the way.

This time around he looked much like any other monk. Old, head shaved, face wrinkled into that map of wrinkles that old Himalayan faces take on. But the look in his eye—that calm and friendly smile! Out of his presence it's hard to put my finger on what it was, but with him in the room there was no doubt of it—a feeling flowed out of him into us, both sharp and soothing. Invigorating—as if the chill sunny morning air had been suddenly turned into a state of being.

He asked us to sit, in English that had a strong Brit accent. He sounded like our buddy Trevor's grandpa. We sat and he brought over a tea tray, and poured us some hot tea, no yak butter in it.

We drank the tea and talked. He asked us about our lives in Nepal, and back in the States, and had us tell him the story of our climb with Kunga Norbu up Chomolungma, which gave him a lot of laughs. "The Diamond Path is hard," he said. "Climbing the Mother Goddess! Still, it's better than getting beat in the head with a shoe." He laughed. "I would like to make that climb myself."

I could see George was trying to decide whether to tell the Rimpoche that the Mother Goddess had actually been K2 all along—there was something in the Rimpoche's face that made you immediately want to spill the beans, about anything at all. So I quick changed the subject. "George here is going to help us try to stop the construction of the road to Chhule," I said.

The Rimpoche looked closely at George. The attention he brought to bear on you was intense, but so suffused with friendliness that you couldn't help but be warmed by it. And his voice was so relaxed. "That would help us," he said. "For a long time we lived at the end of the earth,

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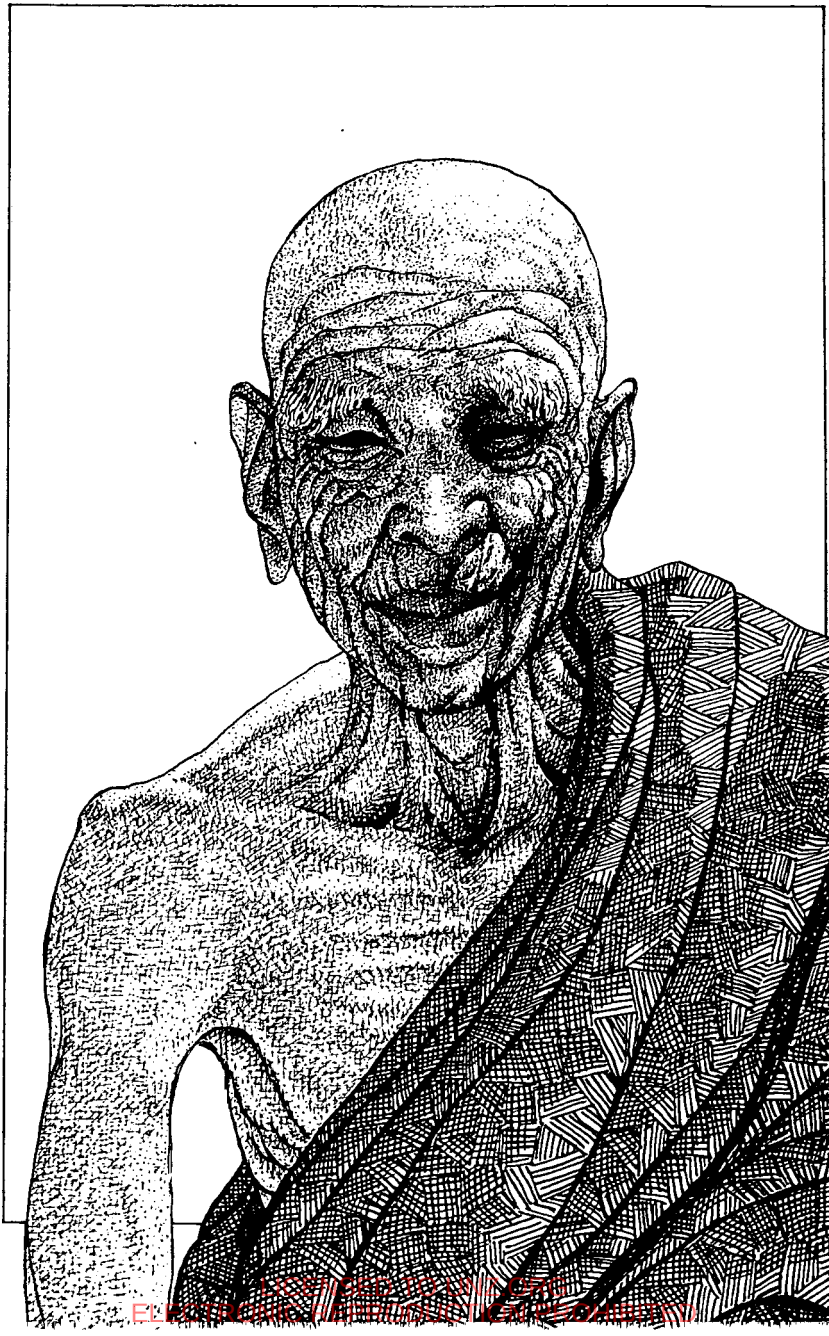

but the world has grown until the danger of being discovered and overrun is very real."

"In a way it's already happened, hasn't it?" George said. He gestured out the window, down at the village and its skirt of refugee tents.

The Rimpoche nodded. "In a way. But we couldn't hide from our people when they were in need, in danger of their lives. And when the time comes, they or their children or their children's children will return to their real homes. But to be discovered by the world at large—to be connected by road to Kathmandu, and its airport. . . . " He cocked his head and looked at George. "Do you want to help us?"

"I'm not sure I can do anything."

"This is not what I asked."

"Well . . . " George struggled, looked away. Finally he met the Rimpoche's patient gaze. "Yes. I do."

"Gotcha!" I exclaimed, and they both laughed at me.

After that they talked of other things. I went through the open wall onto a narrow balcony to look down at the village, smoking away in the morning sun. Inside, George and the Rimpoche laughed at something George had said. "The Chinese are a test," the Rimpoche exclaimed in response. "We have to love them, too."

"Freds says they're going to be reincarnated as leeches," George said.

And they laughed and talked some more. I went back inside and joined them. At one point the Rimpoche leaned over to refill our teacups, moving like a dancer miming the filling of teacups. They had been talking about the road again, and he murmured as if to himself, "The pure is powerless in the face of the impure. Only the sacred vanquishes it."

Quiet minutes, sipping tea in the sunlight—that's how you spend time with a boddhisatva, and while you're doing it, you understand why.

Afterwards, on our way back down, George was silent. Once outside the monastery he said, "You know, I asked him how old he was."

"You did?"

"Yeah, weren't you curious? He's a hundred and twenty, Freds. A hundred and twenty years old."

"That's pretty old."

"He says he's gonna die in three years. He says that if he's reincarnated in Tibet as they usually are, the next incarnation is sure to be a strange one."

"He should aim himself somewhere else."

"I suggested the same thing myself, but he told me it's not easy to do. The Bardo is a dark and dangerous place. He told me that once, back in the forties, a lama tried to reincarnate himself as the King of England—"

"Prince Charles? So that's the explanation."

"No, no. He missed. Got lost. The Rimpoche thinks he may have been

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reborn as Colonel John. That's why the colonel came to Tibet, and got so wrapped up in the resistance, and why he's so confused now about his past."

"That would explain it."

"True. Although I still think it's a case of learning a new language after damage to the speech center of the brain."

"Did you tell the Rimpoche that?"

"No. But I wish I had."

And then the next afternoon Colonel John appeared leading a string of ponies over the pass, the second pony carrying the youngest sister of the Dalai Lama. Suddenly everyone in the village was rushing out of homes and off the slopes, from upstream and down, all converging on the procession until there was a crush around the ponies and they couldn't move, and everyone crying, the Dalai Lama's sister and all her party crying, Colonel John crying, everyone there calling out her name and the tears running down their faces like monsoon flooding. George and I stood back from the crowd, feeling like we had accidentally stepped in on an intense family scene, a reunion that no one had ever really expected, but never stopped hoping for.

Later we were brought to meet the Dalai Lama's sister, Pema Gyalpo. She spoke excellent English, and looked supremely happy to be there in the valley. She laughed and gave each of us the traditional white scarf of welcome, and a little picture of the Dalai Lama, and we had a big meal and all the locals dressed in their Sunday best and all their jewelry, spreading it out among refugee relatives so everyone had some, and we drank chang and sat around the stoves singing until late in the night. George and I didn't know the songs so we drank chang and provided a bass *auoum* to every tune, singing until we were practically unconscious with it. George kept his portrait of the Dalai Lama in hand, and every once in a while he would look at it and say, "Now I see why the Chinese don't allow tourists to wear Phil Silvers T-shirts in Tibet. Look at that!"

And the next morning we were sitting on the rocks that made a lookout point over the hot spring. Water clattered down the stone chute into the empty laundry pool, and steam rose from it and drifted onto all the ferns and mosses, giving them a coat of fine dew. Downvalley the village was just waking up, gray-brown smoke rising from the roofs out of the shadow of the mountain into the sun where it turned bright gold, and George turned to me and said, "Okay, okay, okay. Let's go see what we can do about that road."

So we returned to Kathmandu, taken there by Colonel John, who had a Land Rover stashed with a family on the other side of Chhule. We dug

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it out from a tower of yak dung, and he drove us down the Swiss road faster than I would have liked, putting the Land Rover in four-wheel drifts at every hairpin and looking like he would have preferred to ignore the switchbacks entirely and take off straight down the mountainside, using the road as an occasional take-off or landing ramp. He had us down to the old dirt road inside an hour, and then he ignored ponds and mudslides and the sad roadside villages and drove like a suicide until we reached Kathmandu's Ring Road, covering the distance that had taken our bus eighteen hours in just over four, but leaving us just as exhausted if not more.

After the weeks in Shambhala Kathmandu looked like Manhattan, only noisier and more crowded. The taxi horns and bike bells and the heat and rain and mud and all the cars and shops and faces drove us immediately to the Hotel Star, where we collapsed in our rooms, overwhelmed. Colonel John declared he was driving back to Chhule that very night and we couldn't dissuade him. "I'll be back soon," he said as he disappeared down the stairs. "You'd better have results by then."

So we were on our own, and after George sat under his dwarf shower and ran through two tanks of hot water and burned a couple bowls of hash he felt better about everything. "Let's go to the Old Vienna and eat like pigs," he suggested. "I'm so sick I don't care anymore, beef, milk, I'm having it all." So we went to the Old Vienna Inn and had Hungarian goulash and wiener snitzel and beer and apple strudel, and it was so good we almost died, literally for George unfortunately as he spent most of that night on the toilet moaning.

So he started his dive into the public administration of Nepal feeling a little peaked, which couldn't have helped. First day he spent talking to contacts, visiting the Oriental Carpet Shop, where the owner Yongten had gotten word through the Tibetan exile grapevine that we were to be given all aid. Then he found an American friend of ours named Steve, who worked for the Peace Corps. And finally he visited some buddies of his in Central Immigration, who had prospered heavily in the past from baksheesh provided by George's employer. All of them told him about the same thing, which was "good luck." Yongten suggested he start by going to the Department of Public Works and Transport in the public administration building over on Ram Shah Path. "Don't be in hurry," Yongten told him.

George said he wouldn't be, that he had had a lot of experience in Central Immigration getting trek permits and the like.

"Immigration very quick," Yongten told him. "Very efficient."

This paled George a bit, but he was determined, and the next morning he hopped on his Hero Jet and took off into traffic ringing his bell enthusiastically.

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He came back that night just before sunset, completely beat. "Starved," he said. "Food."

So we went to K.C.'s and I asked him how it had gone.

He shook his head. "I found the right department, I think. There's a Department of Old Roads and a Department of New Roads, if you can believe that. They're both in Singha Durbar, which is a big place."

I nodded, having seen it before—it was a pile set back from Ram Shah Path by a park and a ceremonial circular driveway, and looked like the Lincoln Memorial with a Hindu temple roof.

"The whole civil administration is there. It took me a while to find the Department of New Roads. It was empty."

"You're kidding."

"No. And then somebody walked by and when I told them what I wanted to find out, he told me that since this road was an extension of an old road it would be the Old Hill Roads office I wanted. 'For new hill roads that are extensions of old hill roads you need Old Hill Roads department and not New Hill Roads department.' So he sent me in that direction. Didn't know where it was exactly. After a while I found it, but it was three by then and they had closed for the day. So I came home."

"Hey," says I, "good progress."

No reply from George.

Next morning he was off first thing, and he got back even later. I asked him how it had gone, trailing him to Valentino's for Chinese food.

He shook his head as he scarfed eggroll. "Old Hill Roads told me that since it's a new road I obviously had to go to New Hill Roads. They acted like I was stupid. They said they only do maintenance and they don't know a thing about extensions."

"You're kidding."

"No. So I went back to New Roads and asked someone else, this time with baksheesh. He told me they don't know anything about this road, that it is a very special road."

"Say it again?"

"You heard me. 'Oh, sir! We are knowing nothing about this road you speak of! It is a very special road!' They recommended I go talk to the Department of Information in the Ministry of Communication."

"Ah ha. Progress."

That night he was in considerable distress again—all the exotic Kathmandu food was disagreeing with him. And the next day he found that the inhabitants of the Department of Information knew nothing about our road, not even when primed with baksheesh. They recommended the Department of Roads. Or possibly the office of the National Planning Commission, part of the National Development Council.

Next day the people in the planning commission sent him to the Min-

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istry of the Home Panchayat, which had a Local Development Department. There he was directed to the Department of Roads.

"We're making progress," I told him. "Now we know where not to go."

He snarled.

The next week he started in again. But he was still sick, and appeared to be getting sicker, so it got harder and harder to put in a full day.

One day someone in the Department of Information told him the road was being paid for by the Chinese, but the King didn't want the Indians to know about it. That got us excited, and only a day or two after that, someone in the Local Development Department told him that one of the ministers in the cabinet had gotten the construction contracts for his family, and so he didn't want anyone to know about it.

A couple of days later a third official in the Department of Old Terai Roads informed him that the road was a secret because it was being paid for by the Indians and the King didn't want the Chinese to know about it.

A few days after that, an informant in the Home Panchayat took a packet of baksheesh and told him that the foreign aid ministry had gotten both the Chinese and the Indians to pay for it, so they didn't want anyone to know anything at all about the matter so that neither side would find out what they had done.

"That's so likely it's probably not true," our friend Steve told us.

But there was no way to tell for sure. And all the while George was wasting away in those Singha Durbar offices, waiting to be received by one official or another, until one day he came home and I asked him where he had been that day and he said "Don't know."

"What do you mean, *don't know*? Where did you go?"

"Don't know."

I waved my hand in front of his face. "What's your name, George?"

"Don't know."

I suspected he was starting to burn out, and took him to dinner. Afterwards when he had roused a bit I said "Hey man, I should go along with you. That way you'll have someone to talk to while you're waiting."

"Freds, you just don't look like an official person."

"Well no more do you! You look like a trekker who died of altitude sickness."

"Hmmm," he said, studying a window's reflection of him. "Maybe so."

So we went to Yongten to get more baksheesh, and some haircuts. "Make us look just like we got off the plane," George told him.

"Sure."

"Aid agency types," I said, "with lots of money."

"That will take longer," he said. But he worked away on us with a

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little set of carpet scissors until he had us looking almost like Young Americans For Freedom.

So I began to accompany George, and we went back to another branch of the Department of Roads, both of us spiffed as aid agency types, and in fact that's what we said we were. The office looked like Central Immigration only bigger, the walls covered by bookcases filled with giant black ledgers which were also stacked on the floor and on the desks in the room, the ledgers collecting dust while the desks were manned by Hindu bureaucrats in bucket caps and worn baggy soft beige suits, doing nothing as far as I could tell but chatting among themselves and glancing at us. Finally one of them gave us an audience, but he denied that the Department of Roads had anything to do with this road we mentioned, new or old, hill or Terai.

That night over dinner I said, "Let's ask the Swiss what they know. Since they built that last extension, they should know who's gonna do the new one."

"Good idea," George said.

The fact that I was the one coming up with ideas struck me as a bad sign. George was looking discouraged, and his intestinal troubles continued to disrupt his nights. And Colonel John had returned to town, and every night when we came home he grilled us about how the day had gone and gave us a tonguelashing about what miserable progress we were making. George would snap back at him and he would bawl us out, and I would start chanting in Tibetan trying to calm John down, and sometimes he got mellow and joined me and other nights he just got mad and yelled louder at us in English, and occasionally he got confused trying to do both and went into a sort of catatonic fit. Our neighbors in the hotel were displeased with us, and George was getting exhausted.

But we kept at it. Next day we biked south across the Bagmati River into Patan, the old holy city. There the Swiss Volunteers for Development and the Swiss Associations for Technical Assistance had their offices.

After Singha Durbar the Swiss were so efficient we couldn't believe it. It was like talking to aliens. Two of them brought us immediately into a bright shiny white room with prints on the walls and sat us down at a couch before a coffee table and gave us espresso, and they stayed and asked what they could do for us. It was so amazing that George at first forgot what we were there for, but he collected himself and asked about the road extension.

Unfortunately they couldn't tell us much. They had heard of a proposal to extend the road to Chhule, but they didn't consider the area in question to be suitable geologically. They suspected the project might have been taken on by the Chinese. They suggested we try the Ministry of Administrative Management, but they warned us that each government that

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gave aid to Nepal was a semi-independent power in the country, so the regular Nepali government might not know much. They really weren't sure—in the usual Swiss style they were as unconnected to any other government as they could be, making most of their aid arrangements directly with local businesses.

So they were no great help. And the next day we found no one in the Administrative Management offices wanted to talk to us, no matter the baksheesh.

George threw up his hands and went back to our friend Steve. "Give me a contact," he asked him. "I don't care who it is."

Steve gave him the name of a guy who wrote for the *Nepal Gazette,* the paper that publishes notices of all the official actions of the government. Apparently this guy had been a supporter of B. P. Koirala, the Prime Minister jailed by King Birendra's father back in the sixties. This was a good sign, and indeed when we went into this guy's office in Singha Durbar and George plopped five hundred rupees on his desk and said, "Please let us take you to lunch and ask you some questions, nothing secret, only some information help," the man actually seemed interested, he looked at his watch and said "Well, sir, I am just going to lunch now. If you came along I could try my best to answer your questions, if I am knowing the answer."

So we took him to lunch and he sat there looking at us with some amusement. Little Hindu bureaucrat with a red dot on his forehead and all the rest. His name was Bahadim Shrestha, and he had been born down in the Terai. He had been to Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, and had chosen to go into public administration. All this was good, because most of the administrators in Singha Durbar were Brahmin or Chetri, born in Kathmandu, and fallen into their jobs through family connections as an easy way to make money without working. Bahadim was outside this crowd, and naturally he disliked it. "Poverty and bad administration are Nepal's two big problems," he told us, "and we will never solve the first until we are solving the second. Every year or two we have foreign administration expert come design for us a new system—organization, promotion, all very much detailed and with points and an absolute end to corruption, and these systems the palace secretariat orders us to use and then they are forgotten before anyone understands them." He shook his head gloomily. "It is a veritable museum of systems."

"No lie," George said fervently. "So, if I want to find out who in Singha Durbar is responsible for building a certain road?"

"Oh, sir, it will not be anyone in Singha Durbar at all!" Bahadim looked shocked at the thought. "That is the government house."

George and I looked at each other.

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"You must understand," Bahadim said, rubbing his hands with somewhat ghoulish pleasure. "There are three centers of power in Nepal. Singha Durbar and the panchayat are one center, foreign aid community is another center, and palace secretariat working directly for King Birendra is the third center. It is not determined officially who is responsible for what, but in practice, nothing can be done without the King and his advisors."

"But what about the *government*?" George said, grimacing at the thought of the work we had put in.

Bahadim spread his hands. "The panchayat government is not important for your interests. As the King says often, in panchayat system is no danger of one being lost in a labyrinth of democracy. It is the real administration you must be dealing with."

"But that's what we've been trying to do!"

"Yes. Well. You must go to palace secretariat, then." He saw the expression on George's face and shrugged. "It is confusing."

"You aren't kidding!" Pretty soon George was going to grab his head to keep it from exploding. "But why, Bahadim? Why is it so confused?"

"Well." Bahadim made diagrams with a finger. "In administration there are eleven ministries and twelve departments, headed by ministers or directors. All have assistant directors, deputy secretaries, assistant secretaries, and gazetted officers. But there is no chain of command. Each person is reporting to any superior he likes. The superiors then give orders to subordinates at any level, without the knowledge of immediate supervisors. This creates problems, and to deal with them many new positions at every level have been created and filled, without the knowledge of the finance ministry in most cases. The civil service therefore grew so much that the finance ministry refused to disburse funds to the agencies, agreeing however to do so to individual officials. To deal with this a Civil Service Screening Committee was formed, but it became defunct after a time without tangible result. Similarly the importation of Indian experts." Bahadim shrugged. "Responsibility for decisions is therefore difficult to determine."

George put his elbows on the table and held his head. "My Lord. How did it ever get so messed up?"

Bahadim smiled at George's innocence. "It is a long story," he said.

And with that same mordant pleasure he began to explain. He took George all the way back to the Ranas, the family that had run the country for over a hundred years. They held the prime ministership and all the important posts, while keeping the royal family on a leash and siphoning the country's wealth to private accounts in India. Being Hindu they had over time set up a caste system within their own family, so that you could be Rana A, B, or C, depending on whether you married in the

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family or out, etc. Finally enough Rana C's got disgusted by the A's that they were willing to help kick them out of power, and in 1950 there was a successful revolution that booted the whole family. The king at that time, Tribhuvan, naturally loved this revolution with all his heart as it unleashed him and his family, and he helped to write a new constitution that set up a democratic government based on the Indian Congress Party model.

But then Tribhuvan died and his son Mahendra became King, and Mahendra wanted to run everything himself. He kept trying to take over, and the Congress Party kept resisting him, until in 1960 he got the Army to help him stage a coup and he arrested and jailed Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, and disbanded the Parliament. To make that look less like what it was he started up the one-party Panchayat Raj, a classic rubberstamp government. He also began to use the Ranas as his ministers, the better to keep an eye on them, and so they weaseled back into things, except under the King rather than on top of him. They took up their old ways as quick as they got in, and under them the palace secretariat became the real source of power.

Then when Mahendra died in 1972, his son Birendra took over. Now Birendra had been educated at Harvard and had learned a number of modern vices there, and people assumed that he wouldn't be as interested in absolute monarchy as his father, which was true but didn't matter as anything that Birendra wasn't interested in his Rana secretaries grabbed. So it was back to the Ranas, under a King who was nearly useless. "And I am very sorry to say that the disease of corruption is worse than ever," Bahadim said grimly.

George was looking a little desperate. "So what the hell do we *do*?" he asked.

Bahadim shrugged. "Whatever you do must be done in the palace. All the ministers there of any importance hold a durbar every morning."

"What's that?"

Bahadim explained that people who wanted to get the ministers to do anything had to show up at little receptions in the mornings and lay on the baksheesh and flattery as thick as they could. Then something might happen.

George considered. "Well listen, could you try to find out for us which agency is doing this road? They must have published the information in the *Gazette,* didn't they?"

"No, they did not," Bahadim said. But he agreed to look into it for us.

The very next day he confirmed one of the stories George had been given during his time in Singha Durbar. The Indians were building the

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road. Definite fact. No doubt about it. And it was being kept strangely hush hush.

So I says, "What's your plan, George? I mean when you get hold of the right person, do you have a plan?"

No reply from George.

But he did take me down to the Human Fit Tailor Shop on New Road, so we could upgrade into two perfectly fitted young-executive-off-the-plane Western suits, which were nearly convincing. And we went to the Palace Secretariat to find out what we could.

The Secretariat was a big new squat white concrete building on the edge of the palace grounds, which was the best thing about it—it was just outside of Thamel, so every day we could walk down the street in our Wall Street pseudosuits with our forged paperwork, dodging the cows, and in ten minutes we were there and could dive right in.

But once inside it was much like being in Singha Durbar, except everything was upscale—new offices, new furniture and typewriters, snappy dressers in fresh white jackets. We shuffled from office to office and waited till we had counted every crack in the poorly set concrete walls, only to find out that the functionary we were waiting for was happy to talk about or take our money, but knew nothing and didn't know who did.

And every night Colonel John gave us hell. And George continued to suffer from the runs. It all was beginning to get to him—one day we staggered out into the rain and George looked up into the tall pines in the palace grounds, and he saw the flock of enormous bats hanging head down from the branches and said, "That's them! That's where they go when they get out of the office! Hey!" He yelled at them. "Where the fuck is the office responsible for the *road*, you vampires!"

People stared at us. The bats didn't stir.

"George," I said, "you got to remember that these people are under pressure to be corrupt. They aren't paid much, and this city is expensive. And they get into an office, and everyone there is on the take and then they're given some of the group take, and what can they do? There's hardly any way to avoid it."

"Don't give me that Buddhist mellow trip," George snarled. "They're crooks, and Colonel John is right, there are times when you've just got to kick some ass! If they're not vampire bats, they're vultures. I just wish one would land on me so I could wring his fucking neck for everything he knows!"

The next day he got his wish, almost. A secretary in the National Development Council, Foreign Aid Office, India Branch, took one look at George and his eyes lit up. George smiled and explained that we were from the William T. Sloane Foundation For International Development

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of Houston, Texas, and laid some baksheesh on the table and asked about the road project. Oh, of course, secretary said, nodding. Naturally we would want to speak directly to the deputy minister, Mr. A. S. J. B. Rana, who spoke with visitors and interested parties every morning in the south patio of the Palace Secretariat.

"Rana," says I to George as we left. "That's *the* Ranas, you know. All the real Ranas have the same last four names, that S. J. B. R. stuff."

"I didn't know. But that's good, very good. Getting into the power structure at last."

So we dropped by A. S. J. B. Rana's durbar next morning. Again we were the subject of great interest, and George went at it in his usual style, explaining who we were and looking like money was weighing him down like millstones he wanted to get rid of. A. Rana, a slick character in the usual white jacket, allowed he was interested, and would let us have an audience later in the day.

So we met with him, presented him with a token of the Foundation's appreciation, and George laid his rap on him. Foundation grant, road construction in Nepal, feasibility study of current projects. Questions we wanted to ask about the extension to Chhule. A. Rana was accomodating, and told us he would look into it and we should come back later, putting his eye on the Foundation gift as he said this.

So we came back later.

I didn't always accompany George, but he started going every day. And A. S. J. B. R. seemed more interested every time, asking all sorts of questions about the Foundation and asking outright for money help for his department, and from time to time dropping a tidbit of information, confirming that the Indians were building the road, or giving us figures about the cost, or sending us to one of his colleagues, who also asked for money.

But as he saw he could string George along he got a bit suspicious, and then high-handed. One time we attended a durbar where the group spoke in Nepalese the whole time, and A. Rana laughed and glanced at us or away from us, until it became obvious we were the object of his jokes. And he wanted us to understand that. That made me think that he knew we were bogus, and was just milking us for cash and entertainment value. But George thought we should continue to try.

Then another time George was there alone and another minister came in shouting angrily at A. Rana, and Rana pointed at George and said loudly It's this American's fault, he insists on pestering me! Oh, the other minister said. So this is the one. And they stared at George, giving him the strong feeling that he was well known in the secretariat. "You know, I think we're being set up as scapegoat for something A. Rana is doing on the side," George growled when he told me about it.

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But that was nothing compared to the following day. Apparently A. Rana had passed by George on his way out and they had bumped legs, and before he could stop himself Rana had snapped "Don't touch me!", looking disgusted. George didn't get it. I explained to him that as foreigners we were technically untouchable. Our touch was unclean.

"Aw come on," George said, face darkening.

"That's what some Hindus think."

George scowled. And the next time I went with him, I noticed that after checking to see if A. S. J. B. R. were watching from his inner office, he was slipping a hand into the outer office's desk and snatching stationery and the like. One time when A. Rana left us alone he even typed on some of it. "We'll see who sets up who," he muttered as he slipped the typed pages into his briefcase.

But meanwhile A. Rana was soaking us for baksheesh, demanding payment for his time and then putting us off again. George had to keep visiting Yongten to get more cash, and Yongten started shaking his head. "Not working," he said.

Colonel John was furious. "The bulldozers are there and they'll be starting construction as soon as the monsoon ends! We've got to get something *done*!"

Really, it was worse than Singha Durbar. A. Rana and his buddies in the secretariat were entertaining themselves by playing volleyball with George's brains, bump, set, spike, hilarious! and meanwhile he was still suffering from the runs, losing a lot of weight. He was just about to break.

And so one day A. Rana plopped us in his outer office and got busy ostentatiously ignoring us, talking to somebody on the phone in Nepalese and laughing a lot, and then he put down the phone and emerged from his inner sanctum, yawning. He dismissed us with a wave. "I must leave now. Come back later."

I could hear the cables snapping inside George. All of a sudden he was standing in front of A. Rana, blocking him and saying in a real intense voice, "Listen you little tin god, you either give me the records for that road extension or I'll break your fucking neck."

Which of course is exactly what you must never do with a Kathmandu bureaucrat, as George himself well knew—usually he was Mr. Valium with these guys. But as I say, he had snapped.

And A. Rana immediately huffed up like a cobra in a corner, crying out "Do not think you can threaten me sir! Leave this office at once!" and George took a step toward him, threatening to touch him with his forefinger and growling "Who's gonna make me? Gimme those records right now!"

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A. Rana picked up his phone and cried "Be gone or I will call the police to eject you!"

"What makes you think they'll come!" George shouted, furious at the idea. "You'd have to bribe them to get them to come! And then they'd have to bribe the people at the door to get in, and where are you gonna get all the money for *that*? Gonna skim another foreign aid project? Gonna rip off another development agency to pay for throwing me out of your office? It'll take you *ten years* to throw me out of this office!" and then I had him by the shoulders, and I kind of lifted him out of there, holding A. Rana away with my foot while they screamed at each other and everyone else came out into the hallways to watch.

Scratch that opening.

That night George was inconsolable. "I blew it, Freds, I blew it."

"Yes you did."

We smoked several bowls of hash and went to K.C.'s to get over it. Once there George started to down enormous quantities of beer.

Pretty soon he was shitfaced. "I just don't know what to do, Freds. I just don't know what to *do*."

I nodded. Truth was, my bud was overmatched. I mean what could he do? The people he had taken on were eating up the foreign aid agencies of the entire world, the World Bank, the IMF, all the giant cash cows.

And then Steve came in and joined us and we sat there drinking and Steve told us some of his Peace Corps horror stories, how once the palace had run short on cash when they needed to buy the panchayat elections for their candidates, and so they had gone down to the Terai and cut down a huge swath of hardwood forest and sold the lumber in India to raise the bucks, and then gone to the World Bank and said Oh, Sir! Deforestation, what a horrible problem for us, come look! and took them to the piece of the Terai they had just finished wiping out and sure enough the soil was already in Bangladesh and so the World Bank gave them money, and they quick reforested about thirty acres and put an airstrip in the middle of it and pocketed the rest, and after that they took people down to see the great reforestation project every chance they got, and soaked every visitor for money to help finish the task, which money went immediately to tux uniforms for the Army and other less crucial things.

And this was the crowd George was going up against. With limited funds, and no Nepalese. What was he going to do against guys like these?

He was going to get drunk and smash beer cans against his forehead. At least on that night. No mean feat given that the beer cans were from India and still made of tin. "Thass all right, I'm used to it," George said.

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"Beat my head against a brick wall for a month now, gotta big callus up there." He demonstrated. *Crunch.* I took him home.

We stumbled through Thamel's narrow streets and George stepped in all the puddles as he looked around. "Look, Freds. Look at these poor fuckers, I mean look at them."

Someone said "Hey, Mr. No!"

George shook his head and almost fell over. "I'm Mr. Yes! Mr. Yes! Yes yes yes!"

I waved the curious kids away and helped George walk. He staggered along unsteadily. "Wouldn't it be great if Tibet and Nepal just changed places, Freds? If they had just started on opposite sides of the Himmies? See what I mean?"

"China would have conquered Nepal."

"Thass right! Then they'd be the ones diving into this bureaucracy! They could use it for population control! Send people into it and watch them disappear! Pretty soon China'd have only a few people left, and the Ranas could take over Beijing. Have 'em begging for mercy."

"Good idea."

"And meanwhile the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama woulda been on the south side and they could've kept on doing their brother from another planet trip in peace and quiet, wouldn't it be wonderful, Freds? Wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would, George. You're drunk. You're crying in your beer. Let's get you home and smoke a few bowls and sober you up."

"Good idea."

But Colonel John was back at the Star waiting for us, and he was not amused. He did not approve of our obvious dereliction. That didn't stop us, but whilst we were getting high he paced back and forth in front of us like a mummy drill sergeant, spinning a hand prayer wheel and snapping "What'll we do now? You've spent two thousand rupees and we don't have a thing to show for it! All we got is the most suspicious gang of bureaucrats on earth! What'll we do now?"

George took a huge hit and held it till he turned blue. "Gahhhhhh. Dunno. Dunno! Dunno. I mean, what can we do? We got an Indian road, that's all we know. Swiss didn't want. Why not? Dunno. Indians building it. Chinese can't be too thrilled, I mean the Indians weren't happy when the Chinese built that Lhasa-to-Kathmandu road. Right? All these roads are nothing but attack corridors far as New Delhi and Beijing are concerned, they're both paranoid about it. I suppose we could try to scare them out of doing it, I dunno. Fake a raid, or something like that—"

The colonel grabbed him by the neck and lifted him bodily. "YES!" he shrieked, and let George fall back to the bed. "YES!" Quivering like he had stuck his toe in an electrical socket.

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"Yes what?" George said, massaging his neck.

Colonel John bayoneted him with a finger. "Raid! Raid! Raid!"

"Doesn't work. The little bastards crawl back under the door."

The colonel ignored him. "We dress up some of the Khampas as Chinese, and make a night raid on the Army barracks in Chhule."

"How'll you get Chinese uniforms?" I asked.

"We've got a lot of those," he said darkly. "Just have to sew up the holes." He thought more about it. "We go down into Tibet that same night, and attack the nearest Chinese Army post. Cross over Nangpa La, so it looks to both sides like the attacks came from the other side. Keep Shambhala out of it. Border incident, Chinese complain, Birendra chickens out like in '72, and the road project is stopped for good. YES!" He leaned over to yell in George's face. "*Great plan, soldier!*"

But George had passed out on the bed.

Next morning he couldn't even remember what the plan was, and when we told it to him he wouldn't believe that it was his idea. "Oh no you don't, Freds. You're doing it to me again, and I don't want any part of it!"

Colonel John was already packing.

"Think about Singha Durbar," I said to George. "Think about Birendra and the Ranas. Think about A. Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana."

That got to him. He would have growled, but he was too hung over. He crawled to his window and looked out at the rooftops of Thamel.

"All right," he said after a while. "I'll do it. It's a stupid plan, but it's better than *this*—" waving out at all of Kathmandu.

So we got ready to leave again, which for Colonel John meant jumping in the Land Rover and for me meant packing my backpack, but George had a list of Things To Do. First he bought a couple big canisters of kerosene. Then he bought near all the antibiotics in Kathmandu, a search that took him not only into the little drug stores around Thamel but also to the many dealers on the sidewalks, who sat there on cloth spreads next to folks selling candied fruits or incense and yet stocked state-of-the-art drugs, because they were supplied by returning climbing expeditions. Among the finds was a load of Tinnidazole, which is a treatment for giardia not approved in the States—you take four giant horse pills of the stuff all at once, and next day all the giardia in you is dead, along with much of the rest of your insides no doubt. George bolted down a dose of this poison himself on the off chance it was giardia he was suffering from, and staggered on through his tasks.

One of these was to drop by our friend Bahadim and confer with him, giving him a notice George had written for the *Nepal Gazette,* along with

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some letters that looked to me like they were written on A. S. J. B. Rana's stationery.

Then after quick visits to drop off more paperwork at the Swiss office and the palace secretariat, he was ready. Colonel John drove us up to the farm near the end of the road, and we hid his Land Rover and took off around Chhule, through the rhododendron forest with all its flowers now fallen and matted on the ground, and up the high valley, now roaring with monsoon runoff. Then over the glacier and up the ridge into the snows, over the pass and down into Shambhala.

Once down in the sacred valley, the colonel told everyone about George's plan. All the Khampas went wild for it, but the Manjushri Rimpoche was not so enthusiastic. "By no means can you harm anyone doing this. That would be an injustice so serious that it would overwhelm any good that could come out of it."

Colonel John was not pleased to hear this, but he agreed to it, sounding just like Eddie Haskell— "Of *course* not, holy Rimpoche, no killing whatsoever! We'll direct our fire against property only."

"We just want to scare them," I explained.

"Yes!" Colonel John said, seizing on the concept. "We only want to *scare them*!" and he went away fizzing over with plans to terrify the border posts on both sides so thoroughly that some of them might die of fright, which would be too bad but not our fault, not directly. Not as directly as bullets, anyway.

So with the organizing of the raid he fell back completely into his Marine Corps mode, setting up the two forces and drilling them and making up maps and charts and battle plans. His idea was that the two forces would time their attacks on the border posts in Nepal and Tibet so that they could retreat up into Nangpa La from each direction, meet, and then slip away, leaving any pursuing Chinese and Nepalis to face each other. He thought this was great. Every day he came up with a new twist to add to it. "Okay," he'd say after one of these brainstorms, "we'll come down on Chhule dressed in Chinese Army uniforms, but every fifth man will be wearing one of the monastery's festival demon masks, which'll give the Nepalis a subliminal shock. Consciously they'll think it's the Chinese, but corner-of-the-eyewise they'll think it's all the demons of Yamantaka coming at them!"

George would frown heavily at these ideas. "Don't you think that's overdoing it a bit?" he would suggest. "I mean, it's really important that the Chhule soldiers think that it's the Chinese attacking them. I'm not sure festival demon masks will help support that."

"Yeah yeah," Colonel John would say, dismissing the objection. "It's their subconscious minds we're messing with here, son. Psychological

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warfare. I didn't spend ten years in the CIA for nothing, you know. You just leave that part of things to me."

"If there's any Gurkhas stationed there they aren't gonna care what we look like," George warned. "They're gonna come out firing."

"There's no Gurkhas up here!" Colonel John snapped. "They're Nepali Army police, the worst troops on earth." And he stopped telling George his plans.

Eventually all was ready. Two raiding groups were to go out on the same night, one led by Colonel John into Nepal, the other by Kunga Norbu into Tibet. The Manjushri Rimpoche had given us permission to use some of the tunnels in Shambhala's ancient secret tunnel system, so that we could emerge well away from the valley—just up the ridge, in fact, from the saddle of Nangpa La itself.

Now Nangpa La, as I said, was the old salt and wool traders' pass between Tibet and Nepal, exactly the pass that would be used by the Chinese or the Nepalis if an attack were to be made on each other—not that the Nepalis would ever be so stupid as to attack China, but the Chinese were convinced the Indians would use the route, ignoring the existence of Nepal. So it was perfect for our purposes—it fit with our cover story, and there would be nothing to lead any pursuit into the area of Shambhala itself. And using the tunnels would also keep us from having to cross a 19,000 foot pass twice in a single night. So we could make our attacks and be back to Nangpa La by dawn, and when we had disappeared, any pursuers could sort it out in mutual extreme paranoia.

"I don't know," George kept saying. "Maybe we should just try the Nepal side. I mean what are they gonna think when they *both* get attacked?"

"They'll both think the other side is lying," the colonel said, "and they'll both have years of good reasons for thinking it."

The only question in the colonel's mind was whether he was leading the right group. His deepest hatred was directed against the Chinese, and it was likely that their Army post would be the most dangerous when attacked. But these were in fact good reasons for staying on the Nepali side, because if he and the Khampas were to get in a firefight with a Chinese platoon, they were liable to go crazy and kill them all. Even the colonel recognized this. The chance to scare the daylights out of the craven Nepalis, on the other hand, sounded both satisfying and safe—as good a revenge as the Manjushri Rimpoche would allow for Birendra's betrayal of the Tibetan resistance back in '72.

So three days after our return, we assembled in the monastery courtyard at noon. Demon masks were distributed, along with a collection of rifles and mortars that looked like they had come out of a museum of the Kashmiri Wars. I was loaded up with a mortar, and George was

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given a backpack filled with its ammunition, rocks by the feel of it. The colonel told us how to use the thing. Turned out the mortars were in fact antiques, and the Khampas had long ago run out of ammunition for them, so they made their own explosive charges by gutting bullets stolen from the Chinese. Once these charges were in the mortars you then stuffed in yak wool wadding, followed by cannonballs or birdshot or rocks, whatever was at hand and fit the barrels.

The Manjushri Rimpoche came out and gave us his blessing, and Colonel John gave a pep talk. Then the Kalapa *kuden* joined us, looking stunned and about to die as usual, all dressed in his gold ceremonial robes, and suddenly he fell in a seizure and swole up, and they struggled to tie on his helmet which weighed around a hundred pounds and looked like it would keep him floored, and they tightened the strap under his chin till he should have been strangled and then the spirit of Dorje Drakden entered him fully and suddenly he was strutting around the courtyard with his eyes bugged out, hissing in strangled Tibetan that I couldn't understand, swinging a giant wooden sword and taking short rushes hither and yon that forced us to clear the way for him. It was as clear as the nose on your face that Dorje Drakden had possessed him and was snarling at us—a fierce deity, rushing among us under the dark sky and the strange light of the eternal flame, and damned if some of that spirit didn't arc across into all of us, so that when Dorje pointed his giant sword at the lower entrance to Kalapa we all tore into it.

Down and in we ran, until the walls of Kalapa had run out and the room we were in was made entirely of stone, and we continued down a tunnel that was lit by butter lamps until we clattered down a set of dark stairs into a huge underground cave, walled with gold. This apparently was the Grand Central Station of Shambhala's vast tunnel system. "Whoah!" George says. "You didn't tell me about this."

"I didn't know about this," says I. The few points of light coming from butter lamps didn't show us much, but it seemed to me that around twenty tunnel entrances opened out of this golden cave. "Hope we don't have to make our way back alone."

"Don't say that."

We took off along one of the tunnels, following Kunga Norbu and a few Khampas with torches who ran ahead in the dark filling and lighting the butter lamps. The lamps were in niches which held statues of Bönpa demons or Bodhisattvas, so that we were either shrieked at or cheered on as we passed. There were occasional splits in the tunnel, and usually we turned right, but not always. We moved along at a jog, uphill most of the time. Except for puddles and little drip waterfalls and the lamp niches the tunnels were nearly featureless, so that it was impossible to

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tell how far we were going. But it must have been several miles at least, because it went on for a couple of hours.

Then we stopped all bunched up together while the leaders opened a door made of stone, and we stepped out under billowing monsoon night clouds, on a steep ridge some three hundred yards above Nangpa La. Down in the pass were a line of decrepit chortens, and tall skinny poles that had once held prayer flags. Watching them I caught sight of movement, and a faint high whistle wafted past us, making the hair on my forearms stand out from the skin. "Whoah," says I, and George hissed "Ambush!" But the colonel only shook his head.

"Yetis," he said. "The Manjushri Rimpoche has enlisted their aid."

"Shit," George said. But there was nothing he could do about it at this point. Down in the pass shapes shifted and disappeared, and that was all we saw of them anyway, and quickly we were down in the pass, stepping on exposed rocks so there would be no footprints to indicate where we had come from.

Among the chortens we split into two groups, and took off down both sides of the pass. After that it was a matter of keeping up with the colonel, who was pretending he was in his Land Rover, running everywhere he could, shouting at us and hauling ass over talus slopes and through cold clunking glacial streams, following the ancient traders' trail.

A few hours later we reached the rhododendron forest above Chhule. Rain had knocked down all the flowers and they lay matted on the forest floor like busted birthday balloons, thousands of them so that the ground was pink and the sky was a billowing cloudy white, strongly backlit by a full moon. Between the pink ground and the white sky hundreds of black gnarly rhododendron branches twisted up into a light wet snow that began to fall. It was a weird place, and when the moon shone through the wrack like a street light it only looked weirder—pink ground, twisty black shapes, falling snow, clouds racing across the moon, and every once in a while, shapes moving in the corner of the eye.

At the low edge of the forest we were on the outskirts of Chhule, and the barracks that housed the Nepali Army were on our side of the village, just on the other side of a narrow clearing—three long two-story stone buildings with sheet metal roofs and wood-frame windows, all peacefully asleep in the depths of an ordinary village night. Somewhere in the village a mastiff was barking, but that happened every night in every village in Nepal, so there was nothing to worry about from him.

Silently we began to spread out along the forest's edge, following the colonel's instructions. He set the mortar teams in a semi-circle facing in on the barracks, putting me and George at one end of the semi-circle, behind a short fat old rhododendron. He chuckled grimly at the sight of

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the barracks roofs. "Gonna sound like we're bashing them in the head with trashcan lids. Here, take masks—you'll be off in their peripheral vision."

He gave us demon masks and flashlights and we put on the masks, and luckily our demons had pop eyes so enormous that the cut holes of the pupils were big enough to see through. George was transformed into a green red blue and gold horror, grinning with three or four times as many teeth as he should have had. And I suppose I looked much the same. Once the fracas began we were supposed to shoot two mortar rounds off, and then slink around amongst the trees, flashing the flashlights up at our faces for some subliminal negative advertising and then dropping behind trees to dodge any fire that we might draw.

Great plan. Although George didn't think much of it. And when he took the cannonball rocks out of his backpack to load our mortar, he was even less impressed. "Freds, what is this? Can you see this? These rocks, they're blue! Aren't they blue?" He shone his flashlight on them for a second. "Freds, these are turquoise!"

He ran through the trees and caught up with the colonel and dragged him back. "Colonel, what the hell are we doing bombing these guys with *turquoise*?"

The colonel already had on a particularly grotesque demon mask, but somehow it was obvious that the wild grin on its face was perfectly matched underneath. "Beautiful, isn't it?" the colonel said. "They'll come running out of those barracks and see this stuff scattered everywhere, and *they'll think the sky is falling*. They'll go stark raving mad with fear!"

No reply from George.

Finally he shook his head violently, skewing his mask, and in a muffled voice he said, "Colonel, doesn't it seem to you that, you know, perhaps bombing these guys with turquoise is going to make it *hard* for them, tomorrow morning, to *understand* the night as a *raid by the Chinese Army*—"

But before he had managed to finish the question and get his mask readjusted the colonel was off, and had given the whistle that was the signal to start the attack, and one of the Khampas wearing a mask that had been beat particularly hard with the ugly stick had snuck up to one of the windows and put his face up against it and flashed his flashlight into the room and then at his face and shrieked, and that was the signal for all of us to fire our mortars, in a ragged volley that lasted about half a minute. The Khampa at the window hauled ass back into the trees and the riflemen opened fire and shot out all the barracks windows, and then a dozen mortar loads of turquoise came whistling down out of the sky and a few of them at least landed on those metal roofs, and they began to boom horrendously under the impact. All the while we demons were

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dancing between the trees flashing lights on our faces, and from inside the barracks there came cries of mindless panic to warm the colonel's heart for several incarnations to come.

So everything was going great for a couple of minutes at least, but unfortunately one of the demons got carried away and ran up to the nearest barracks to stare in a broken window, feeling a demonic invulnerability that was sadly misplaced because someone inside shot him. He fell back and being nearest to him, George and I ran out into the clearing and grabbed him up. His right arm was bloody and it seemed to me he was in very serious pain until I recalled his mask. Black clouds had rolled overhead and it was as dark as it got that night, snowing hard and crazy with the sound of gunfire, and our demon comrade was just indicating he could walk on his own when *whump,* there was rock falling all over us. Hit by friendly fire, we were. I got whanged hard in the shoulder and back and the Khampa jerked sideways, but George took the brunt of it. Luckily the colonel's turquoise cannonballs tended to shatter into fragments on being fired, so that they came down like birdshot rather than bowling balls. Still, enough landed on George that he crashed to the ground, felled by what looked to be the raw material for several dozen turquoise earrings.

He was cut up around the back of the head and the shoulders, and was lucky to have been wearing his mask, because it was all bashed up. Knocked out cold, too. Now our wounded Khampa buddy had to help us, and he used his good arm and I got on the other side of George, and we dragged him back into the rhododendron forest right quick.

After that things got confused. Loud ceremonial fireworks were going off over the Nepali barracks, and their roofs still banged horribly, but I could only begin to conclude that there were in fact some Gurkhas stationed in Chhule, because a group came charging out of one of their barracks unimpressed by our firepower and unaware that the sky was falling, and they started shooting at us with very loud *brrrp brrrps* that seemed to indicate very big guns indeed, and rhododendron branches began to rain down left and right.

Now since the Manjushri Rimpoche had ordered us to avoid killing any of these Nepali soldiers there was nothing to be done at this point but to beat a very hasty retreat, while shooting back all the while in demon Chinese Army style. Our comrades did this, but the wounded demon and I were having a tough time of it with George, who had come to but was clumsy and confused, staggering along between us mumbling incoherently as if his drubbing had put him on the very short path to enlightenment, but I doubted it. He was simply stunned, and we were losing ground on the colonel and the Khampas.

I crashed into an abandoned mortar, still steaming in the snow. *Brrrp*

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brrrps spiked into us like nails of fear, and branches snapped overhead to emphasize that this reaction was not inappropriate. I decided we had to fire another mortar round at the Nepalis, although now I am not sure why, and I had the explosives charge and wadding jammed down into the barrel before I discovered there were no chunks of turquoise or rock of any kind left in the area.

So we were crouched behind a tree trunk letting George catch his breath and thinking it was all over when without a sound we were suddenly joined by short dark figures, with long arms and funny heads. I had almost melted from under my mask with fright, when I saw that one of them was wearing an L.A. Dodgers baseball cap.

"Buddha!" I said.

"Na-mas-tayyy," he said in his squeaky little voice.

I took off my demon mask and grabbed up his skinny hand, too overwhelmed to be surprised.

"What?" said George. "What?"

"We've got some help," I told him, and in a considerable hurry I indicated to Buddha that the mortar should be loaded with rocks, using a wadded handful of fallen rhododendron blossoms as an example. He misunderstood me and he and three or four of his bros quickly stuffed the barrel entirely full with the matted blooms. "What the hell" said I and fired them off, and then the yetis had us picked up and we were hauling ass uphill through the forest, leaving the Gurkhas behind to figure out why it was snowing rhododendron mush.

Halfway up the glacial valley we caught up with the colonel and the Khampas and our yeti companions dropped us, suddenly skittish at the proximity to so many strangers with guns, Shambhala allies or no. "Thanks, Buddha!" I called after their disappearing forms, and then the wounded Khampa and I hustled George upvalley after the rest of our band. The Khampa called to them in Tibetan and they waited for us, and then the Gurkhas were within firing distance again and we were off to the races, headed for Nangpa La as fast as we could.

It began to snow and rain both, and an hour later we found that one stream we had forded on the way down was now unfordably high. We struck out upstream and found a stand of trees near a narrow spot in the flow, so the Khampas cut down two trees and dropped them across the water onto a prominent boulder on the other side. The colonel crawled over first and secured the tips of the trees as best he could. Then we sent George across this impromptu bridge, but in doing so he shoved the trees apart and was about to slip between them into the stream, wrecking the bridge in the process. He caught an arm and a leg over each tree, and was stuck. "Hold on!" the colonel shouted at him furiously. "Don't move! Don't let go!" And in Tibetan he ordered the rest of the Khampas to come

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on across. Most did it without stepping on George, but by no means all. When we were all over the colonel and I crawled back out and dragged George over the two trees to safety.

The experience seemed to have roused George from his stupor—he had shifted from muttering "What, what, what" to saying very distinctly, "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Well," I said, trying to cheer him up, "at least we weren't wearing crampons."

No reply from George.

Now we were over the largest of the streams, and could beat a retreat up to Nangpa La without too much trouble. In fact we got into the pass with everything timed so nicely that you would have thought it had all been going according to plan, and who knows maybe the colonel thought it had, because we arrived in the pass with the Gurkhas hot on our tail, and Kunga Norbu's party came hauling up out of Tibet with the Chinese Army hot on their tail, and we slipped up the ridge and ducked into our tunnel and slammed shut the door, leaving the Gurkhas and Chinese to sort things out if they could. "They'll end up killing each other," I said to the colonel.

"Good," he snarled.

So then it was back through the tunnels, dragging every step of the way. It was lucky for George that it was a downhill run, because when we got to Grand Central Station and then the basement of the monastery, we walked out into clear morning light, which meant we had run all night long. This was standard Khampa guerrilla-raid style—I suppose we had done about fifty miles in the previous eighteen hours, and been shot at for fifteen of them. I was beat, and George was devastated. He looked like he still had his demon mask on, and one of the gorier ones at that, face all puffy and bruised and bloody, mouth clenched in a scowl and eyes popped out with disbelief that he had taken part in any such expedition as ours had been.

But we were back.

Lhamo and the rest of the villagers took good care of George. For several days he crashed at Lhamo's house in a fever, moaning and groaning, and Sindu and her kid hung around helping Lhamo to feed him and wipe his face, being careful to avoid the cuts and bruises which Dr. Choendrak was tending in standard doctor style, stitches and everything.

Dr. Choendrak also decided to take on George's dysentery once and for all, and he dosed him with the *rinchen ribus*, the Precious Pills. These pills are composed of a hundred and sixty-five ingredients, including precious metals ground to powder as well as a great number of medicinal plants, and they come wrapped in colored cotton tied with rainbow-col-

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ored thread sealed with wax. It takes twenty druggists up to three months to concoct them, and they are so strong that generally they wipe the patient out for a day while they rearrange the balance of his interior. George was wiped out completely for five days, and for a while Dr. Choendrak was really worried about him. But eventually he got up and around, a mere shadow of his former self, stick-limbed and with a scraggly bearded face that looked like midget axe murderers with tiny axes had been after him.

We got a break in the monsoon, several sunny days in a row, and George spent the time on the lookout rock above the laundry pool, watching the locals live their lives. He was still kind of sick, and he didn't have much energy, but up there he didn't need it. New arrivals at the pool would greet him in Tibetan and he would reply in English, and everyone was happy with this arrangement. A lot of the time he slept on his rock like a cat.

In the meanwhile Colonel John went down to Kathmandu, and when he came back, I went up to George all excited. "Hey," says I, "do you want to hear what we did?"

"I know what we did," he says darkly.

"But do you want to read about it in *The International Herald Tribune*?"

"What?"

I held out the battered issues of the paper that the Colonel had brought back with him. "Looks like there was a fair bit of fallout," I said as George hustled down off his rock and snatched them up.

The first one was from July 29, three days after our raids. Back on one of the inner pages was a little article titled "Nepal Protests Alleged Border Incursion By Chinese," and the headline basically told the story.

The very next day it had moved onto the front page— "Beijing Accuses India of Attack On Tibet," on top of a pretty sizeable article, describing the charges and countercharges of the two countries. Apparently the Chinese felt that the attack on their border post had been made by the Indians' Special Frontier Force, going through Nepal so as to make it look like it wasn't them. And the Indians felt that this whole charge was a lie to cover a Chinese attack on Nepal, which being on their side of the Himalaya they considered to be an attack on their own security.

So far so good. But the *Tribbie* for August 2 had a big top-of-the-front-page headline which read "TROOPS MASS ON CHINA-INDIA BORDER."

"Oh my God," George said as he ripped through the article, and as he read it he kept on saying that, in higher and higher keys.

A good portion of the front page was devoted to that article and related

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side articles, describing the disappearance of the DMZ on the India-China border in Kashmir, the unprecedented deployment of Indian troops in Sikkim, and also how the Pakistanis had warned the Indians not to mess with their buddies the Chinese, while the Soviets had warned the Chinese not to fuck with their buddies the Indians. "Oh my *God,*" George kept saying.

And then the next day's paper was practically nothing *but* the border crisis, all in big type, and even allowing for the fact that this was the Hong Kong edition of the *Trib*, with a resulting emphasis on Asian affairs, it still had to be admitted that this was a major league crisis. Clashes between Indian and Chinese and Indian and Pakistani forces had been reported, some of them really serious. And American satellite photos showed massive troop build-ups on the Soviet-Chinese border.

"Oh my GOD!" George said. "Where's the next day? Where's the *next day?*"

"That's all the Colonel brought back."

"*What?* He left in the middle of all this? Without telling anyone that we started it? It's been, what?" He checked the date. "Five days! Oh my God!"

He ran back down to the village and called Colonel John an idiot. "Damn it, we could have just started World War Three!" he shouted at him.

It turned out the colonel didn't much care. He figured that World War Three was one of the few ways Tibet could get out from under the boot of the Chinese, and if that's what it took, it was okay by John.

George ripped him for this. "What would the Manjushri Rimpoche say if you told him that! He'd throw you right out of this valley!"

Which was probably true. But the colonel just stuck out his lower lip stubbornly. He knew the Rimpoche would kick his ass for such a selfish sentiment, but he wasn't going to lie—that's how he felt about it. If the world wouldn't stop a case of genocide when it was staring them in the face, then fuck 'em. Let them eat nukes.

George was so furious he couldn't talk. He went over and kicked one of the stone and sod walls lining the village street so hard that several stones in the top row fell off. Then he threatened to go tell the Rimpoche of John's murderous hopes, if the colonel didn't drive us back down to Kathmandu *immediately.*

John was agreeable, and so that night we were over the pass and down to the Land Rover, hustling all the way until I feared George would drop, and the next afternoon we were back in Thamel, where life seemed to be going on just as if we were nowhere near the brink of World War Three, although in Kathmandu that meant nothing. Armageddon could

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have happened the week before and Kathmandu would probably not yet be aware of it. It would be the last place to know.

So George rushed around the used bookstores trying to find the latest *Tribbies* and failing, which made him paranoid. "Maybe that'd be the first sign," he kept saying. "Maybe that means the end has already come."

Finally he found one, as usual dated four days before—August 5, and the front page was still full of the crisis. The main article described an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, very acrimonious from the sound of it. A side article reported as to how our President had been overheard saying that if the Russkies and the Chinese really had a disagreement well then maybe they ought to duke it out man to man. He could think of worse things happening. This view had apparently displeased the Russkies, who immediately declared that they considered the USA to be allies of China, and party to any aggression by same.

And so things stood. Not for anything could George find any later *Tribbies* in Kathmandu, and besides, the situation was clear. The world was on the brink.

The only question was, what were we going to do about it.

"We've got to hit it from every angle possible," George said. "I've got some groundwork laid already, thank God."

It seemed to him that the letters he had typed on A.S.J.B. Rana's typewriter and passed around could be adapted to the present emergency. "I figured Rana was trying to use us as a cover for something he was doing in the secretariat," he said as he sketched out flow charts on the floor. "Remember how someone once told us they thought the road to Chhule had been contracted to the family of a minister? I decided it might be useful to make it look like Rana was that minister. He's probably the one who approved that road, after all, and he was keeping us coming back as if he needed to keep on eye on us to prevent us from finding anything out. So I wrote up a bunch of memos implicating him, and spread them around before we left. Now if we can connect that stuff to the right people. . . ."

So the next day he dressed up in his foundation suit and charged into Singha Durbar, and with his face chopped up like it was he looked so bizarre that no one dared stop him. He went to the offices of the *Nepal Gazette* and found Bahadim, and told him to slip the word to the relevant ministers that the attack on Chhule had not been made by the Chinese Army, but was in fact the work of a faction in the palace secretariat, which was feuding with another faction in the secretariat that had stolen all the contracts for the Chhule road.

That same afternoon he went to the Swiss agency. The letters George had left there implicated A. S. J. B. Rana in a plot to sabotage the Chhule road, as part of one of the Rana family's endless tussles among themselves

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for higher ground at the palace. George told the Swiss that the border incursions had in fact been faked as part of this Rana family struggle, and he said that the Swiss should use that information to try to cool things down in Geneva and on the international scene generally. The Swiss told him they were already working on it.

Last thing that afternoon, he cracked the palace secretariat and found the Ministry for Development, Chinese Friendship Agency office. This, as Bahadim had told him, was run by a Rana who personally and departmentally was a rival of our A. Rana, and George had primed him before our trip with the information that A. Rana was accusing him of trying to sabotage the Chhule road. Naturally this had gotten the other Rana paranoid, and when George returned to tell him that A. Rana had gotten people to fake the border incursion, and was now telling foreign aid agencies that the raid had been organized by this guy in the Chinese Friendship Agency, the Rana there sat down abruptly before his telephone and got to work.

That evening George was utterly beat, but he lay there on his bed figuring out the ramifications of the day's work—who was likely to tell what to whom, and what it would mean. And the next morning he dropped by the Chinese embassy with another letter written on A. Rana's stationery. This one asserted that the incursion into Tibet had been made by Tibetans desperate to escape a mopping-up operation run in secret by the Nepali Army, which had hoped to make the Chhule road completely safe for use by the Special Frontier Force of the Indian Army, by forcing all Tibetan guerrillas over into their home country.

Lastly he biked over to the American embassy, and told them he was a friend and representative of one faction of the outlawed Nepali Congress party, the party that had formed the legal government until the royal coup of 1960. They wanted the Americans to know that both border attacks had been part of the internecine warfare in the corrupt palace secretariat, that one group in the palace wanted to stop the Chhule road by creating friction between China and Nepal. Now that the hoax had gotten way out of hand, the perpetrators were too frightened to confess. George told the Americans that the Congress Party had spies in the palace who had found all this out, and they wanted everyone in the world to know so that tensions would be eased.

Then when the embassy official George had been talking to went to get the ambassador, or some higher-up like that, George quick got up and asked a secretary for the bathroom, and then slipped out the front and biked away, joining me at the corner and then leading the way at high speed. When he told me what he had told the embassy I said "Hey, that's almost the truth."

"Best kind of lie," he panted.

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On the way back to Thamel we biked down Naxal road, past the palace itself. We stopped to let some cows cross, and George craned his head back to look up at the bats hanging from the pine trees on the palace grounds. "They're in conference," he said, laughing weakly. He was pale and his face sweaty. "Trying to work it out. I just gave them some of their own medicine. Exactly Birendra's technique. Put enough contradictory information out there, it's interference. Like wave tanks in physics class. So much cross-chop . . . all goes to. . . ." He stopped, and I thought he was considering his next words. But then he keeled over, bang up against a cow and then down into the street. Fainted dead away.

I flagged a cab and stuffed him in it, and took him to the Canadian health clinic, back up near the American embassy. This was a Western-style clinic that looked like it had been lifted out of Glendale, and when you were sick the sight of its white walls and pastel prints and old magazines and the smell of disinfectant was enough to make you weep.

They took George in and gave him some intravenous stuff—he hadn't eaten that day, and was still suffering from dysentery despite the Precious Pills. So he was dehydrated, and some of his cuts were infected—obviously his immune system had been shredded by years of antibiotic abuse. In short, he was completely fucked up.

They made him stay in their little two-bed hospital to pull back together. It took a while, and I brought him *Tribbies* every day.

And slowly, with our four-day delay on real time, we watched the crisis simmer down and go away. Everyone decided it had been a false alarm. Rumors of secret American and Swiss diplomacy were rife, especially in George's room in the clinic. Critical intervention, no doubt. And so George would finish the day's read, and give a little shudder, and then fall asleep again.

One day I slogged through a downpour to K. C.'s with the Swiss guys, and over some beers they told me that the Chhule road was deader than Mussolini. The Indians wouldn't build it for anything, and Birendra and his gang wouldn't build it for twice anything. Too dangerous.

So the next afternoon I went to collect George, as the Canadians were releasing him. "You did it, George! They'll never build that road now. Aren't you happy you decided to help us out?"

No reply from George.

We cabbed down to Thamel and walked the main street toward the Star. George was such a ghost of his former self that the street merchants didn't even recognize him, and they laid their rap on as if he were a stranger rather than their beloved Mr. No. "Change money? Hash? Carpet? Pipe? Change money?" and he would stare at them as if he were considering their offer, or trying to understand it. I've often tried to understand that money-changing bit myself, I mean the street folk pay

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you more than the official exchange rate for traveler's checks. They then sell the traveler's checks for more than they bought them. Whoever they sell them to must also sell them for more than they bought them, I assume, and so on up the line, and what I wonder is, how does it end? Doesn't someone at the end finally get stuck selling them for the official exchange rate, and losing lots of money?

Anyway, George stood in the street just staring at people as if he were having trouble focusing, until they gave up and moved on.

"Look," he kept saying. "Look, Freds. Look. That's a pile of garbage. Right there in the street."

"That's right, George. We dodge that pile every day."

"Cows eating it. Rats. Dogs. Kids."

"That's right."

We walked on.

"Let's go to the Old Vienna," he said suddenly.

"Are you sure your system can take it?" I asked.

"I don't care."

But in fact he did care. He had suffered so much that when the food hit the table he got cautious, and decided that actually he shouldn't really eat the meat, because we had never really been able to decide where Eva got it. He spooned a little of the goulash broth up and left the chunks of meat for me, and sat there trying to sniff the meal down, looking mournful as I had my snitzel Parisienne and apple strudel buried in whipped cream.

So when we rolled out of there George was feeling a little low, even though the latest *Tribbie* we found in a used book store seemed to consider the border crisis pretty much over. But as I was folding the paper up I saw a little filler article on the back pages, headlined "Everest Is Still the Highest." "Hey, dig this," I said to George, and read— "Early this year University of Washington scientists stunned the mountaineering world, recalculating K2 to be 29,064 feet. Now an Italian team has used satellite measurements to put Everest back where it should be, in first place at 29,108. The team rechecked K2 and found it to be 28,268 feet above sea level. U.S. mountaineers are willing to accept the Italian measurements,' you ain't kidding! Great news, eh? Now you won't have to climb K2 with Kunga Norbu and me."

"Good," George said.

"And you saved Shambhala," I told him. "You saved the holiest, most important hidden valley on the whole earth."

"Good," he said. "But we still need to get some kerosene stoves up there."

"Not necessary. Didn't you hear? The Rimpoche is going to try that idea of yours—they're making ceramic pipe to put the eternal flame down

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into a communal kitchen, maybe even several of them. Dr. Choendrak and some of the other monks are really getting into the design and all."

"Good."

But he was still low, and still looking around as we made our way through Thamel toward the Hotel Star. "Freds, that's *grass* growing on the *roof*."

"I like grass on the roof."

"Freds, this is one of the biggest streets in this nation's capital, and it's mud."

"That's right."

"And this is the nation's *capital*."

"That's right. Kinda like parts of Washington DC, as I recall."

He sighed. "Yeah, but still. . . . "

Then we ran into the beggar and his daughter. They stood there hand in hand, both with free hands extended toward us, looking just the same as always except wetter because of the monsoon, the beggar with his gap-toothed smile and the little girl in her shift looking like a UNICEF poster and not all that different from Sindu's little boy up in the valley, and George said, "Oh, man," and ransacked his wallet to pull out a fistful of rupees and give them to the beggar. The beggar took them and stepped back, looking shocked.

George pursued him, looking back at me. "Freds, we gotta do something, don't we?"

"You just did, George."

"Yeah, but something more! I mean, couldn't we hire them to clean our rooms, or sweep the halls out front, so they had a job?"

"The clerks hire that gal with the baby on her back to sweep, I think it's the same kind of thing." And actually the beggar had a good thing going, his little girl was worth lots of rupees to him in this neighborhood. There were other beggars hurting bad compared to him. But I didn't say that.

"But couldn't we . . . couldn't we tell them to do just our rooms?"

"They wouldn't understand you."

The beggar and his little girl retreated cautiously from us, and then wandered off. George's shoulders fell.

"There's nothing we can do, is there?"

"No. Just what you did, George."

We reached the Star and went up to our rooms, and read the rest of the *Trib*, and smoked a nightcap, and laughed over the great adventure of saving Shambhala, not to mention world peace. And we recalled our climb of Everest and the time we unkidnapped Buddha and set him free, and I told George for the first time about how Buddha and some of his bros had showed up during the battle of Chhule to help us out. "No," he

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said. "You're kidding." And he wouldn't believe me. "YOU'RE KIDDING!"

It made me giggle. "Ain't that my line?"

And he laughed, and we talked some more, about Nathan and Sarah, and Jimmy and Rosalynn, and all the rest, and it was fun.

But George wasn't easy about things, not really. He was restless. When I was about to crash he decided to take a walk down to K. C.'s and have a beer. I told him not to overindulge so soon after his recovery because he still looked like death, fresh scars and black rings under his eyes, the envy of every anorexic in the world, but he assured me he was fine and took off.

A couple of hours later fleas in my mattress woke me, however, and I checked in George's room and found he hadn't returned. It was late for K.C.'s. Worried that he might had gotten shitfaced and passed out, I went down to the streets to have a look for him.

Thamel was dark, it was late and the narrow streets were near empty. No noise but the dogs barking some neighborhoods away. K.C.'s was closed, that whole area really pitch black.

And so I almost stumbled across him. He had found the beggar and his daughter, who slept against the wall of the German Pumpernickel Bakery under a wide eave where they were sheltered from rain and caught some warmth from the ovens on the other side of the wall. George and the beggar were sitting back against that wall on each side of the little girl, who lay stretched out between them. All three fast asleep. George's head was canted back against the brick and he was snoring like a crosscut saw, his face all dessicated like he'd been dead in a desert for forty years. Lightly I kicked the bottom of his boot and he jerked a little, cracked his lids, stared up eyes glazed. He recognized me, and a little furrow of fear and loathing creased his brow—what now? it seemed to say. "Wake up, bro," I said quietly. "Come on home."

No reply from George. ●

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

FAR, FAR OUT

A few years ago, Harry Harrison asked me to contribute an original story to an anthology he was trying to put together, under contract, called *One Million A.D.*, anything I wanted to do, as long as it was set in the far, far future.

Well, the concept was intriguing, but I seldom am able to come up with a story for a theme anthology, even one whose theme was as loosely framed as this one, and I didn't come up with one for *One Million A.D.* either.

A couple of years after that, I asked Harry what had become of the anthology, which I had never seen published. "Nothing came of it," he told me. "I just couldn't get the stories. You people just weren't capable of writing them."

Recently, I've read four novels which set me to thinking about my failure to come up with a story for *One Million A.D.* and the whole question of dealing with the really far future. Two of them, *The Last Legends of Earth* by A.A. Attanasio and *Tides of Light* by Gregory Benford, are more or less unequivocally set thousands of centuries in the future. Greg Bear's *Eternity* does things with time that make it impossible to pigeonhole the novel temporally, and Paul Park's *Sugar Rain* is set in a universe whose nature, temporal and otherwise, has yet to be revealed.

Interestingly enough, all of these novels invoke historical discontinuities of one kind or another in order to get the reader from the here and now to the there and then.

Tides of Light takes place in the galactic center unknown millennia from now, and is a sequel to Benford's *Great Sky River*. It is narrated from the viewpoint of Killeen, the main lead of *Great Sky River*, leader of a small band of human survivors fighting to simply exist in the interstices of a dominant machine civilization in the first book, and fighting an advanced organic alien civilization as well in the sequel.

Benford, being Benford, has gotten his humans from Earth to galactic center without resorting to faster-than-light travel as a literary device, meaning it has taken them millennia and generations. Humans have degenerated from a civilization that built great cities in space called "Chandeliers" to a civilization living in grounded

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"Arcologies" to a civilization existing in small "Citadels" to remnants living on the run, losing any real connection with their long historical past in the process.

In Attanasio's *The Last Legends of Lost Earth,* aliens from another dimension have constructed a complex artificial solar system millions of years after the destruction of Earth and populated it with reconstructed humans, terrestrial life forms, and post-human higher Terrestrial sapients from all eras of Earth's past. The aliens have set all this up as an elaborate trap for the zotl, other aliens who feed off the pain of sapients and who have invaded their continuum, too, with the humans as nothing more than the bait in an incredibly elaborate "Roach Motel," destined to collapse back into the nothingness from whence it came when its job is done, taking all the elaborate worlds that Attanasio has set up with it.

Bear's *Eternity* is a sequel to his *Eon* (or, more likely, it would appear, they were conceived as one novel that was too large to publish in a single volume), an exceedingly complex set-up temporally and spatially speaking. In *Eon,* an artificial worldlet called the Thistledown, which somehow arrives from the future, contains the machinery for generating "The Way," a kind of tubular wormhole universe, fifty kilometers in diameter and more or less infinitely long, snaking, not only through space and time, but alternate universes too, capable of being colonized along its endless interior, but also serving as a kind of space-time Metro with gates leading into other worlds, other times, other alternate realities.

In *Eon,* Bear did quite a masterful job of showing us centuries of the evolution of human culture inside the Way on "Axis Cities" capable of traveling down it along the central space-time "flaw." He succeeded, in part, by using more or less contemporary characters capable of being temporally displaced by the weird space-time set-up, of being stored electronically after organic death in so-called "city memory," of being resurrected at various points along the space-time geodesic, and by using these characters as bridges to viewpoint characters born in the far future (whatever *that* means in this context), or even artificially created as electronic patterns in city memory, living whole lives inside the computers before passing their "incarnation examinations" and receiving self-designed human bodies.

Eternity takes place after (if that is the word) the Sundering, in which half of the Axial City chooses to go off up the Way into the far future, while the other half takes the Thistledown back to the solar system in the (a) past, to aid in the rebuilding of an Earth which has been devastated by events generated by its original advent in the first place.

And if that isn't complicated enough, *Eon* ended with one character stranded on an alternate Earth in which the Alexandrian

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empire never fell, and *Eternity* takes us to that alternate world via the viewpoint of her native granddaughter. In addition, we have the alien Jarts, who are following the orders of "descendant command," aka the Final Mind, existing literally at the end of time, but capable of sending avatars down the timelines.

Talk about historical discontinuities! Bear twists space-time into a Philadelphia pretzel and serves it up with alternate world mustard.

Paul Park goes even further with *Sugar Rain,* a sequel to *Soldiers of Paradise,* and a prequel to god-knows-how-many books to come, albeit in an entirely different direction.

Here you don't know where and when things are taking place at all. *Soldiers of Paradise* set up a world that its inhabitants called "Earth," but an Earth so radically altered and in a solar system so bizarre that if this was indeed meant as the far future, it was a future so far, and at the other side of so many historical, evolutionary, and indeed astrophysical transformations and discontinuities that it might as well have been pure fantasy, in the mode of Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* or Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun,* only more so. At least in the Vance or the Wolfe, you more or less knew *where* you were, if the *when* was pretty much meaningless.

With Park, you have people called "men" and "women" on a planet they call "Earth" who ride "horses," but by the bye you learn rather casually en passant that the "men" and "women" have tails, and the "horses" are carnivorous, and "Earth" has seasons that last for decades, and the solar system has too many planets, and a moon called "Paradise" that seems to migrate from orbit to orbit in a manner that makes no sense in terms of celestial mechanics.

Okay, so maybe the nomenclature is simply a literary convention that certainly has been used before, and maybe this is pure fantasy, or an alternate world setting that might as well be fantasy. There is a powerful religion, the cult of Angkdt, capable of assigning people to various Hells after death, and a ruling class called the Starbridges, whose golden blood is *their* ticket to Paradise. And "antinomials," who eschew names, whose language is music, and who appear to be biologically different. So this must be fantasy, right?

But wait! These people have *cars.* And they smoke marijuana and hashish and call them that. And they have a kind of Victorian-level industrial technology. And synthetic foodstuffs. And rather advanced medical science. And they use words like "fuck" and "shit."

In *Soldiers of Paradise,* it gradually emerges that the mythology of Angkdt is grounded in the strange astrophysical set-up, and the Hells are planets, and the "Starbridges" are the descendants of a starship Captain. In *Sugar Rain,* there is a revolt against the theocracy and

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the Starbridge aristocracy that seems pretty directly modeled on the French Revolution, down to the creation of an atheistic republic, a Reign of Terror, a settling down into a kind of bureaucratic rule.

And we also learn that this happens on an "annual" basis, in one form or another. A theocracy for the long harsh winter, a secular revolution in the spring, and more, no doubt to be revealed in subsequent installments for summer and autumn, in the manner of Brian Aldiss' *Helliconia* trilogy, of which the set-up is quite reminiscent. But unlike the denizens of Helliconia, this civilization doesn't seem to lose its history every cycle, and the cult of Angkdt seems to be designed to mutate with the seasons.

Where and when are we? Who the hell knows? I'm not even sure Park does, for there are no answers at the end of *Sugar Rain*. We are certainly far, far away and many discontinuities from the here and now, far enough for this to be fantasy, were it not for the careful integration of technology, what would seem to be the deliberate insertion from time to time of jarring modernisms in the dialogue, the deliberate analog to the French revolution, the religion that seems carefully designed to mutate to fit the social necessities generated by the seasons, the astronomical knowledge, and the clear indication that whenever and wherever this is and whoever these "men" and "women" are, they got there, generations ago, by starship.

All of which would seem to be clearly designed to give *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain* the feel of science fiction, not fantasy, which is to say that Park also sets the reader up to assume that the mysteries will sooner or later be resolved in a logically acceptable manner.

Why is it that science fiction writers almost always seem to resort to a discontinuity of one sort or another, and frequently several, when they attempt to deal with a far future setting?

Well, consider the alternatives.

Benford is dealing with human characters hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of years in our future, confronted with a vastly superior machine civilization, as well as organic aliens so highly-evolved that they are cyborgs capable of using a Cosmic String to carve up a planet and use the material to construct a kind of Dyson sphere. They have made a millennial generations-long voyage from Earth to the galactic center. If Benford had not resorted to using viewpoint characters at the other side of a series of historical discontinuities and cultural amnesias; then he would be confronted with the task of telling his story through human consciousness hundreds of thousands of years of history and evolution more advanced than his own.

Is this really possible?

In terms of the level of psychological realism and emotional empathy that Benford is working on,

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of course not. How could it be? In order for Benford to realistically convey the consciousness of humans a million years of upwardly-evolving evolution beyond his own, *his* consciousness would have to be capable of containing *theirs*, and explicating it to the reader as well—the literary equivalent of lifting himself by his own bootstraps. It can't be done. It's an unresolvable paradox.

Benford *does* use one of the highly-evolved alien cyborgs as a viewpoint character, and he succeeds masterfully. But this, while certainly a great leap of the speculative imagination, is not quite the same thing as getting inside the mind of a *human* consciousness a million years in advance of one's own. An alien consciousness is, well, alien, entirely imaginary and made up, whereas a *human* consciousness arising in a far future at the end of a million years of continuous upward evolution and with an unoccluded historical perspective of same would have to be portrayed as the end product of that process, a process which the writer himself would have had to undergo before he could convey its spiritual, psychic, and intellectual results.

So Benford, like the rest of us, is of necessity reduced (and that *is* the word) to using the device of historical discontinuity to create a human viewpoint character not really evolved beyond the reader's consciousness or his own to give us (and himself) psychological access to his far-future world.

Attanasio forthrightly sidesteps the problem in two ways. Some of his many human viewpoint characters are people resurrected from our own era or from our past, quite comprehensible contemporary or even archaic characters placed in his imaginary far-future landscape.

Others are people born for the first time into his alien-created artificial solar system, but, *not* being the products of hundreds of thousands of years of upward evolution, but rather arising out of local cultures not really in advance of our own, their consciousnesses are easily enough accessible to the twentieth century reader, and the story that binds the whole epic together is one of the oldest in the tale-tellers' repertoire, that of the star-and time-crossed lovers, separated at the beginning, and journeying through space, time, and transformations to meet again not long before the story's end.

Bear, on the other hand, does attempt to take the bull by the horns, giving us viewpoint characters such as Olmy, who was "born" inside "city memory," contains fragments of other personalities, including the electronic ghost of an alien Jart, and who in general is indeed a creature of his advanced far-future civilization.

But the larger part of the story in *Eternity* is carried by viewpoint characters whose life stories began more or less in our time, or on the post-catastrophe Earth, or in the Alexandrian alternate world,

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which, while quite different from our own, has not evolved beyond us either in terms of technology or of consciousness.

And indeed, when the plot requires that the Final Mind be brought on stage, Bear employs much the same device that he has the Final Mind itself employ, which is to create reduced avatars of this incomprehensibly advanced consciousness out of previously familiar and more or less ordinary human characters. So too do we glimpse the mind of the Jart through the filter of Olmy's personality.

Bear does not use the device of historical discontinuity precisely as such. Instead, he sets much of the action in *Eternity* on a post-catastrophe Earth in the relatively near future, in the alternate Alexandrian world which has the feel of an altered Terrestrial past, and on space stations orbiting the post-catastrophe Earth and deeply concerned with its more quotidian problems. And he gives most of his more evolved "composite" characters at least partial "original birth" in our near future.

Which is to say that, in a sense, he is using a kind of converse of the historical discontinuity device by time-warping his far-future civilization and its highly-evolved characters into a story that largely takes place on and around a rather familiar post-catastrophe Earth and an alternate Terrestrial present with the feel of the past, thereby grounding his far future firmly in more familiar psychic and historical territory.

In *Sugar Rain,* the discontinuity is total, or almost total. Park's far-future world is either in orbit around an alien sun, or in our solar system at a time so distant that its orbit has completely changed, along with the orbital mechanics of every other body in the system. He creates a rich complex of believable cultures indeed, but, except for bits of technology, the hashish and marijuana, and a few other random odds and ends, there is no connection whatever to any culture, religion, or history of the recognizable past, which is to say our present. Biologically speaking, one is not even sure whether his characters are descended from human stock at all.

On the other hand, the characters in *Sugar Rain,* biologically human or not, are not very outré to the contemporary reader, and do not at all possess consciousnesses in advance of our own. Their culture is utterly different, but they themselves have quite comprehensible psyches. Indeed, they seem rather modern in terms of their emotions and thought-processes, and, to judge by the occasional use of contemporary profanity, the hash and the marijuana smoked in hash pipes, bongs, or rolled into joints, this effect would seem to be quite deliberate.

So one of the problems in dealing with the far future that almost has to be finessed by one sort of discontinuity device or another is the cre-

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ation of viewpoint characters. If one is not going to emulate Stapledon and stay out of their consciousnesses entirely, one must either warp contemporary consciousnesses into the far future milieu to serve as psychic, and, to an extent, intellectual, access points, or utilize a historical discontinuity to create a far future culture whose denizens are *not* the end products of a millennial upward evolution. Or, as Bear has done, twist and warp time to do a combination of both.

Creating a far future setting also seems to imply the literary need to invoke some kind of historical discontinuity, though here the imperative would seem to be not quite as categorical. Imagining a culture and technology of the far future that has evolved out of the present without a break may not be impossible, only damnably difficult.

Of the books presently under consideration, only those of Greg Bear even attempt to do this, and even Bear resorts to discontinuities of a sort. In *Eon,* he did an excellent job of extrapolating the stepwise evolution of the human culture that evolves within the Way, using the device of electronically resurrectable characters to make the quantum jumps so as to give the reader—and himself! —psychic access. But he extrapolates a far future human society evolving in *isolation* from Earth, its historical past, and its ongoing future, developing strictly on its own terms, and not as a technological culture evolving out of the continuation into the far future of the processes which have created our own.

And when the main focus of the action returns to Earth in *Eternity,* he twists time so that he does not have to deal with a far future Earth, and indeed he invokes the familiar device of a nuclear Armageddon to give us an Earth that in most respects has *retrogressed* from our own.

Neither Attanasio nor Park attempt to create cultures with any historical roots in our present, and Benford goes no further than to equip Killeen with "Aspects," electronically-stored personalities out of various eras in his past (our future), whose historical knowledge is fragmentary indeed, and who serve mainly as literary devices to sketch in the necessary back story as ambiguously as possible.

But while the literary convention of using an historical amnesia of one sort or another as a device for creating comprehensible far future humans in a far future culture is so nearly universally employed within the science fiction canon as to seem almost a necessity, paradoxically enough, it quite violates the rules of rigorous technological plausibility.

Even if one does assume a nuclear war, an ecological disaster of monumental proportions, or some other cataclysm, a far future human civilization, no matter how star-flung, is still likely to have pretty much total access to all pre-

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vious human history and culture, certainly at least as far back as the turn of the twentieth century.

It's a matter of redundancy of information storage. Books printed by the hundreds of thousands of copies, by the millions, reprinted regularly if they have achieved cultural significance. Microfilm storage in large libraries at hundreds or thousands of locations. Dozens, scores, sometimes hundreds of prints of significant films. And, since the invention of TV and videotape, and the video recorder, all of ongoing history and culture recorded as it happens with sound and in color, endlessly duplicated. CD-ROMs capable of storing vast amounts of prose, images, sound, data, blueprints, on a single disc, and those discs capable of being stamped out by the millions.

In reality, even an all-out nuclear war, unless it did exterminate human life on the planet (in which case there would be no successor culture to set the story in anyway), is simply not going to be able to create a real historical amnesia. No matter what happens, multiple copies of everything and in a multitude of different media are going to be left lying around in the ruins to be discovered and decoded by any advanced successor civilization.

Our far-future descendants are going to know far more about us than we know about classical Greece and Rome or ancient Egypt or even the Middle Ages, and our knowledge of these predecessor civilizations is not inconsiderable. Our literature is still enriched by references to their history and mythology. Great figures from *our* millennial past, like Alexander, Pericles, Jesus, Buddha, still resonate strongly in our present. Our dream lives, our very consciousness, incorporate archetypes deeply rooted in the distant past. We are even in possession of fairly decent transcriptions of the major works of Homer.

The classical Greeks, the ancient Egyptians, the early Chinese dynasties, still make their heritage felt today, and *they* didn't have high-speed printing presses, videotape, CD-ROMs, or motion picture film to produce thousands or millions of identical copies of everything of any importance.

The problem for the science fiction writer in seriously attempting to create a *realistic* far future human civilization is formidable indeed, once you face the fact that a discontinuity of knowledge great enough to divorce that civilization from previous human history is not likely to happen.

I myself have been writing the stuff for twenty-five years, and I've only tried to create advanced far future human societies four times. The first was in my first novel, *The Solarians,* more or less of a conventional space opera, on a relatively primitive level where such questions of historical and psychic verisimilitude never arose.

The second was a novella called *Riding the Torch,* and there I por-

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trayed a society evolving aboard a fleet of starships fleeing the destruction of the Earth. This culture indeed had total access to all of previous human history, but the Terrestrial history to which it had access ended not long after our present, and the more advanced shipboard culture which arose evolved as a pocket universe in complete isolation, shaped by the memory of *our* history to a certain extent, but more so by the imperatives of its own unique existential situation.

At some point, I began pondering why, as a science fiction writer, I had pretty much ignored dealing with far future settings. And I quickly came to the conclusion that it was simply because I had read so little in this vein that I found convincing. Almost all of it assumed a discontinuity of some sort, almost all of it took place on the other side of some kind of cultural amnesia, and the implication of even current information technology was that this simply was not likely to happen.

The Void Captain's Tale was my first attempt to deal with the far future after this realization. Nevertheless, I found that I too had to resort to a series of *other* literary tricks involving limitations and restrictions if I was even going to try to create the illusion that I was dealing with a far future human civilization without employing the usual device of an historical discontinuity.

The "Second Starfaring Age" in which the novel is set isn't *that* far in the future, two or three thousand years at most, and the timeframe is left deliberately vague. The whole story takes place on a single starship, and it is narrated in a single first person viewpoint by the captain, who is deliberately choosing an archaic form, the captain's log. Thus, while there is absolutely no historical discontinuity between the Second Starfaring Age and the present, I still used the same restricting device that I used in *Riding the Torch,* as well as the further limitation of the diary form.

Even within these parameters, I quickly found that once I took the problem of creating an advanced human culture seriously I *had* to fudge things.

For instance, most science fiction set in the far future has the characters speaking and thinking in more or less conventional English, a standard literary convention.

But of course, in realistic terms, this is nonsense. The language or languages of a millennial future will be as different from contemporary English as English is from archaic German or French is from Latin and then some. So I tried to invent a future language called "Lingo" which would be a generalized human language, a merger of our present Babel of tongues.

Of course any novel *really* written in such a language would be gibberish to the contemporary reader, even if it was writable by the likes of me, which it wasn't. So I set Lingo up so that everyone

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spoke their own personal dialect of the universal Lingo. I could then fudge things by choosing a first-person narrator who spoke an "anglish sprach of Lingo," which is to say English merely spiced with words and phrases from other languages, and using a rather Germanic syntax.

I was flattered when certain critics praised the novel for being written in the actual language of the future culture, but of course they were wrong, all I had done was create the literary *illusion* that the book was really written in "Lingo." *Real* Lingo, like any real language of the far future, would actually be almost entirely incomprehensible even to a trained contemporary linguist.

I did the same thing again in *Child of Fortune,* also set in the "Second Starfaring Age," choosing another first person narrator who "happened" to speak "an anglish Sprach of Lingo." Here I wanted to give a more panoramic picture of the culture, and I used a different restricting device. Instead of confining the action to a single starship, I chose as the viewpoint character a young girl on a voyage of discovery, a somewhat naïve consciousness moving through her extremely sophisticated culture.

Certain critics and even blurb writers spoke of the lead character's travels to a profuse diversity of planets. But actually the action is confined to two starships, three cities, a small town, and an alien forest, another literary illusion, borrowed from the filmic technique of montage, using a few selected and fairly easily rendered locales to suggest a culture and a universe far more diverse than what is actually described.

So too with creating the illusion of historical connection between the Second Starfaring Age, our present, the human past, and the centuries of imaginary history between. As contemporary fiction is often larded with references, historical, literary, and mythic, to the past in order to give it depth and resonance, so did I use this time-honored technique to lard the speech patterns, tales told by the characters, artforms, architecture, and so forth, of the Second Starfaring Age with references to both real past human history and the imaginary history of the back story to create the illusion of historical and cultural continuity.

The extrapolation of the far future technology was the easiest part, as it usually is. Given a few centuries of the further evolution of science and technology, we will know all the laws of nature and how to manipulate them. Without a collapse, human cultures even a thousand years in the future will be able to do everything that it is possible to do, in terms of creating technology and artifact. For the science fiction writer, it is then merely a matter of indulging one's fantasies to the max, and creating what *you* would create with this kind of ultimate technological puissance, a power that you in fact

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have within the compass of such a set-up.

The point of this digression into my own creative processes is to elucidate the fact that portraying a far future society is strictly a matter of literary technique. Real accuracy, true realism, is simply impossible. For one thing, what you're trying to describe doesn't exist at all outside your own head. And for another, the science fiction writer of today has about as much chance of accurately predicting the *real* future of even three thousand years from now as Homer did of describing rock and roll, interactive video-games, genetic engineering, or the Nielsen system for rating network TV shows. It's all illusion.

From this perspective, we can see that assuming an historical discontinuity, while it may be questionable in technological terms, is indeed a useful and powerful *literary* device, just as having far future characters speak and think in more or less conventional English, while almost certainly a violation of reality, is another literarily useful convention.

It might conceivably be possible to outline ten thousand years of history between us and them, but it would be stupefyingly boring to read, and the best you can do is use a few literary techniques to create the illusion of historical continuity, or failing that, invoke a discontinuity and be done with it. And even things like *Child of Fortune, The Void Captain's Tale,* or Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* can only *suggest* that the characters are thinking and speaking in a language other than English.

Which comes perilously close to saying that writing science fiction set in the far future is, at least in terms of using literary techniques to create the *illusion* of verisimilitude, indistinguishable from writing fantasy.

Take *Sugar Rain,* for example. Remove the occasional technological artifacts that seem congruent to our own technology, call the Starbridge aristocracy something else, edit out the contemporary four-letter words, have the characters smoking some alien drug instead of "hashish" and "marijuana," and what do you have?

You have a fantasy novel set on a world in a solar system which seems to make no astrophysical sense, inhabited by a race of tailed people and fanciful animals, and with a culture and religious mythos that seems entirely discontinuous from our own. Even the analog to the French Revolution is a time-honored fantasy device; if you're writing a fantasy, there's no reason at all why your plotline cannot be based on the French Revolution, the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, or the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. It's done all the time.

Park is a fine writer, and he has created a rich and complex culture which indeed hangs together quite well internally, but good fantasy does that all the time, too.

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What makes *Sugar Rain* (and *Soldiers of Paradise)* seem to take place in some unknown far future instead of never-never land, what makes the reader take it as science fiction, is simply that Park has used literary devices to create the illusion that this fictional universe has some connection, however tenuous, however hidden, to our own.

Of course, having created the supposition that this is science fiction and not fantasy, it also creates the expectation that this connection will be explicated before the series is finished, for this is one of the main narrative tensions Park uses to interest the reader in the next book. And if it is never resolved, the series, which could have been successful fantasy without doing so, will end up as failed science fiction.

Attanasio reverses this in *The Last Legends of Earth.* As Philip Jose Farmer did in the *Riverworld* series, he resurrects characters from the human past into a synthetic universe quite different from the one they died in, to wit our own, though he does not use real historical personalities. Farmer gave us more or less of a science fictional explanation for the existence of his outré universe at the end of the fourth novel in the series, something we can only hope that Paul Park will eventually do, whereas Attanasio gives it to us up front in the set-up.

But remove the explanation of the *Riverworld* universe from the end of the series, and remove the alternate dimension set-up from the beginning of *The Last Legends of Earth,* and you have stories which would work quite well as fantasy of a certain kind, namely the *Unknown* school, in which you set up arbitrary alternate laws of existence at the outset, and stay within them till the end.

Indeed, from a certain scientific perspective, say that of Gregory Benford, it could be argued that Attanasio has done just that. His aliens have all the attributes of god-like beings from a human perspective, the solar system they set up is rather arbitrary and its orbital mechanics questionable from the point of view of conventional contemporary astrophysics, as is all the time travel.

Attanasio invokes mathematical concepts of multidimensionality and black hole cosmology to frame the novel as science fiction, but an astrophysicist would probably find his astronomy a good deal less than rigorous, and while a theoretical mathematician of a certain school might find his mathematical concepts sound, the same astrophysicist would probably have a lot of trouble accepting their transmogrification into actual physical phenomena.

On the other hand, Attanasio could justly argue that, in *literary* terms, this is a central device of science fiction. That, with the exception of so-called "hard science fiction," *all* science fiction is fantasy of the *Unknown* kind, in which the arbitrary laws of the fictional

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universe are created, not out of whole cloth, but out of some bending of the presently known laws of our universe or extrapolation out of the grey areas of same, aka the "speculative element," thus creating the literary illusion that the created universe is in some way continuous with our own.

And the further out you go into the future, the more tenuous that connection can become and still retain literary legitimacy as science fiction, even a certain logical plausibility. As you go further and further into the future, science fiction approaches fantasy as a limit asymptotically.

Gregory Benford might take some issue with this notion, and in a way already has, with his metaphor of all science fiction which is not hard science fiction being like "playing tennis with the net down," meaning that hard science fiction is that science fiction which eschews violation of the presently known laws of the continuum.

But even hard science fiction in this sense may be seen as fantasy of the *Unknown* kind, and especially when it attempts to deal with the far future, as Benford does in *Tides of Light,* which is to say another literary convention built around an arbitrarily-assumed set of natural laws, to wit the best current scientific knowledge.

The arbitrary assumption of hard science fiction is that we already know everything there is to know about the nature of the net and that we can precisely fix its position in the center of the court in space and time. And by stretching a scientific metaphor a tad, one can even argue that this assumption is inherently paradoxical, violating as it does the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, a central maxim of the hard science game itself.

Which is certainly not to say that playing by the rules of "hard science fiction" is not a legitimate literary device, and indeed a useful and powerful one. It adds a certain unique intellectual interest to a piece of science fiction and it also helps create the literary illusion that the future imagined universe is continuous with our own.

But it *is* an assumption, and a literary device, and the further out you go along the timeline, the more obvious that becomes. Even Benford, who dutifuly eschews faster-than-light travel in *Tides of Light,* nevertheless allows his aliens to employ a cosmic string as a tool, and while the physics of how they do this doesn't violate the hard science fiction convention, the cosmic string itself is a remnant of a previous phase of our continuum, in a sense, where, paradoxically enough, according to our best scientific knowledge, the natural laws were different, and, if you go back far enough, in inherently *unknowable* ways. This being so, how can we really place the intrusion of other sets of natural laws into our continuum in the far *future* outside the realm of legitimate possibility?

Only by making an arbitrary lit-

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erary assumption if it suits our esthetic purpose.

And indeed, a recent and apparently well-received astrophysical paper would seem to legitimize, at least theoretically, wormholes through space-time as means of achieving both time travel and faster than light travel *within* the rules of the hard SF game.

The point being that the nature of the net keeps changing and so does its position, and perhaps the most arbitrary assumption of all is that it will stay the same in the far future as it is in the moving interface between the past and the future that we choose to call the present.

Greg Bear might consider himself a "hard science fiction writer," too, and *Eternity* has the "feel" of hard science fiction, even though the net keeps deforming and moving all over the court. Which is why we can see here, much more clearly than in *Tides of Light,* that this "feel" of hard science fiction, rather than arising out of scientific accuracy, which may or may not be present in such a work (see Larry Niven, James P. Hogan, certain works of Clarke and Asimov), is an *esthetic* effect created by the application of certain literary techniques to create the *illusion* of continuity between an imagined universe and our own.

After all, *Eternity* posits time travel, access to alternate universes, reverse causality, even the transmission of data from the final collapse of our universe through the Big Bang into the next. Whereas Benford sticks pretty close to the rules of the hard science fiction game in his far future, Bear would certainly seem to be playing with the net down.

And yet the *illusion* of his story taking place in the far future of a universe continuous with our present is pretty much the same.

How do Benford and Bear create much the same literary effect even though they are playing by two quite different sets of arbitrary extrapolative rules when it comes to content?

Benford tells his far-future story through the singular viewpoint of Killeen, who, while he may have implanted chips containing Aspect personalities, and move through an exotic landscape, is actually, psychologically speaking, pretty much of a contemporary consciousness, shorn of much contemporary knowledge, rather than an outré evolved personality with whom our empathetic connection would be at best tenuous. And while Bear opts for multiple viewpoints, some of whom would seem to be exotic entities indeed, in psychological terms, even Olmy is a consciousness not that far removed from our own.

This would seem to be one of the cardinal *literary* devices of hard science fiction, the use of psychologically more or less conventional viewpoint characters to serve as access to the exotic realm, creating the illusion of continuity with our own time and place by allowing us to perceive the altered future

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through the filter of a familiar consciousness.

So, too, while Bear resorts to inventive prose to give us bits and pieces of the consciousness of the alien Jart, and Benford experiments with prose to a certain extent to render the dialogue of the Aspects, and plays a little with the speech patterns of his far future humans, when it comes to physical description, action, and scientific explication, both of them, like most people writing hard science fiction most of the time, stick to straightforward, clear, transparent, conventional syntax and language. Even when Benford puts you inside the mind of an alien consciousness with a radically different sensorium, or Bear takes you inside the mind of a man of the far future like Olmy, they do so in more or less standard English prose.

They also both, in common with most people writing hard science fiction, including Arthur C. Clarke himself when he is really doing so, scrupulously deny Clarke's dictum that "any sufficiently advanced technology will seem like magic." Even though Benford sticks much closer to scientific and technological *plausibility* than Bear does, none of the far future artifacts in either book "feel" like magical devices; both of them use careful and even meticulous physical description and explication of theoretical scientific principles, pseudo or not, to create the illusion of a far future technosphere equal in solidity, comprehensibility, and consistency to what we experience as our own.

Which is not to say that the literary techniques of hard science fiction are the only means for creating the illusion of a literarily credible far future universe. See the works of Cordwainer Smith or Jack Vance, in which a similar illusion is created with stylistic pyrotechnics, overwhelming richness of cultural detail, and multisensory description, approaching the esthetic problem from the inside out, by overwhelming the reader's disbelief with sheer density of detail and sensory vividness.

And if the techniques of Smith and Vance, or for that matter of Paul Park and A.A. Attanasio, might be applied with equal success to worlds of pure fantasy, why so might the *literary* techniques of Benford, Bear, and the hard science school, as witness Clive Barker's *Weaveworld,* the *Unknown* school, which, after all, was godfathered by none other than John W. Campbell, the occasional fantasy of Larry Niven, Suzy McKee Charnas's *Vampire Tapestry,* or even, or indeed particularly, the contemporary fantasy of Stephen King. If all sufficiently advanced science, chez Clarke, can seem like magic, then all science fiction set far enough into the future is really going to be fantasy.

But contrariwise, given sufficiently successful employment of a set of properly chosen *literary* techniques, most fantasy can be made to seem like SF.●

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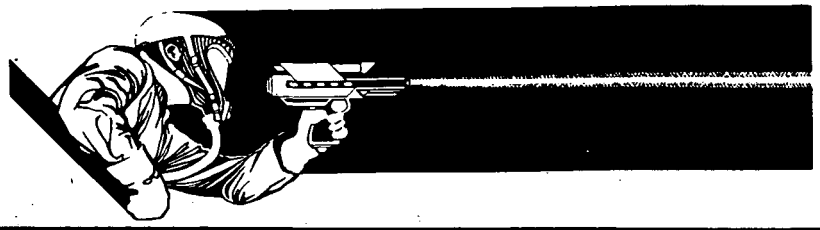

NEXT ISSUE

We have a special treat for you next issue, as **Isaac Asimov** returns with a brand-new Robot story, our Mid-December cover story, "Too Bad!" It's as thoughtful and thought-provoking as all of Isaac's Robot yarns, but this one is also a taut and suspenseful tale of adventure and exploration, as one robot dares to boldly go Where No Robot Has Gone Before.... And as an extra-special bonus for a special issue, Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Connie Willis** gives us a Robot story of her own—a Robot story starring Isaac Asimov himself, as the Good Doctor must use all of his not-inconsiderable wits to solve a "Dilemma" that threatens the future of Human-Robot relations on Earth.... Don't miss either of these two very special stories; you won't soon forget them!

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: **Harry Turtledove** returns with another story in his popular Basil Argyros series, detailing the adventures of a "Magistrianos" in an alternate world where the Byzantine Empire continues to hold sway—this time sending Basil to Alexandria to investigate the nefarious goings-on concealed behind a "Pillar of Cloud, Pillar Of Fire"; Nebula Award-winner **Nancy Kress** shows us how something very Ancient indeed is introduced anew into the world, in "Renaissance"; new writer **Kathe Koja** takes us to a high-tech future for a bittersweet study of the ageless things that fuel "The Energies Of Love"; new writer **R.V. Branham** offers us a sly, cat's-eye view of life, in "The Color of Grass, The Color of Blood"; British author **Mary Gentle,** author of the popular novels *Golden Witchbreed* and *Ancient Light,* makes her *IAsfm* debut with an evocative visit to a strange and dangerous world, in "The Tarot Dice"; **Melanie Tem** spins an eerie tale of identity and loss, in "The Better Half"; and **Richard Paul Russo** returns with a sinisterly fascinating story of some people obsessed by the Moon, in "Lunar Triptych: Embracing The Night." Plus an array of columns and features. Don't miss our jam-packed Mid-December issue, on sale at your newsstands on November 14, 1989.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Many major cities have their big annual con in November. Note also the Ottawa parley this week. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and again, make it plain just what it is you're asking them about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

OCTOBER, 1989

16-20—**SF Festival.** For info, write: **D. C. Ferguson, U. of Ottawa, 85 Univ. Cres. #318, Ottawa ON K1N 6N5.** Or call **(613) 564-5055** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Ottawa ON (if city omitted, same as in address), on campus. Guests will include: none announced. Bi-lingual conference, done by the university (not students). Leads conveniently into Boreal that weekend.

20-22—**Boreal. (613) 749-8050 or 564-5055 or (819) 684-0180.** U. of Ottawa Jock-Turcot University Centre. Annual Canadian national French-language con, by and for fans. Follows SF Festival (above).

20-22—**NecronomiCon. (813) 677-6347.** Tampa FL. G. A. Effinger, Tom Kidd, Tim Zahn, Lee Hoffman.

20-22—**NotJustAnotherCon. (413) 545-1924.** Amherst MA. J. Yolen, H. Clement, A.C. Farley, B. Eggleton.

27-29—**World Fantasy Con, Box 31815, Seattle WA 98103.** Fantasy fan's WorldCon. Sellout expected.

27-29—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80227. (303) 426-0806.** R. Bloch, Forrest J. Ackerman.

27-29—**DreamCon, 1321-N SE Everett Mall Way #103, Everett WA 98208. (206) 776-9764.** Larry Niven.

NOVEMBER, 1989

3-5—**WindyCon, Box 432, Chicago IL 60690.** Schaumburg IL. Longyear. The big annual Midwestern con.

3-5—**STLCon, % Students' Onion, Hatfield Poly, Box 109, College Ln., Hatfield Herts. AL10 9AB, UK.**

10-12—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802.** M. Bishop. A major Northwestern con.

10-12—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. (804) 865-0371 or 495-4648.** F. K.-Freas, the Lindahns.

17-19—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 342-1672.** Farmer, P. Anderson. Oldest con.

17-19—**SoonerCon, Box 1701, Bethany OK 73008.** W. J. Williams, B. Foster, David Brin, B. Thomsen.

24-26—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601.** Pasadena CA. The LA area's main con.

24-26—**DarkoverCon, Box 8113, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609.** Timonium (Baltimore) MD.

24-26—**Fantasy Fair, Box 820488, Dallas TX 75382. (214) 349-3367.** Commercial media/comics con.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $65 to end of 1989.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

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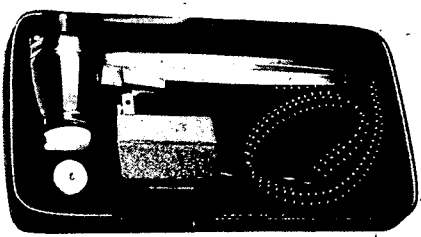

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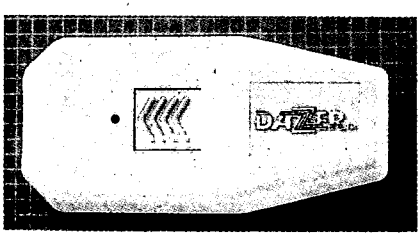

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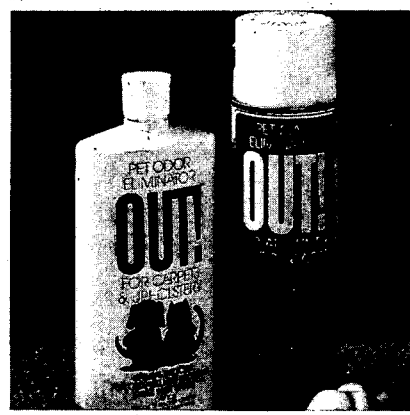

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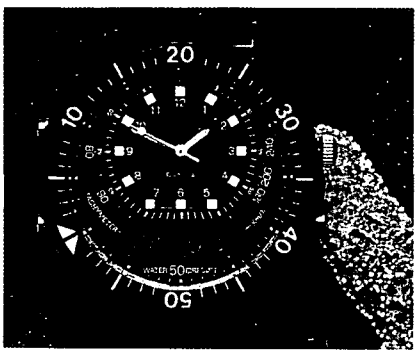

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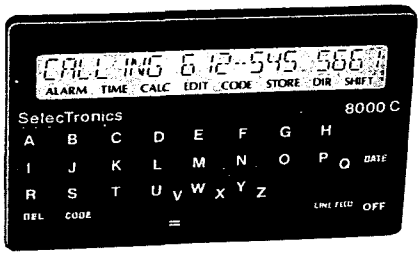

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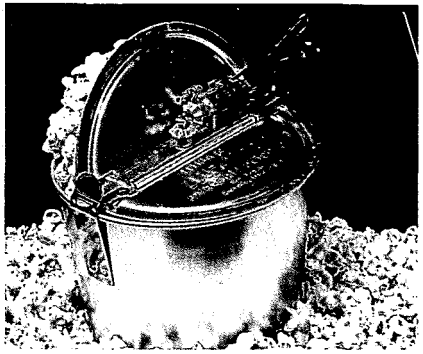

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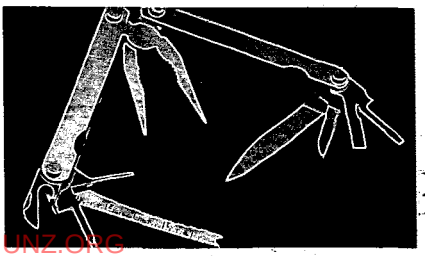

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